

The Leviathan of the Covenant

明血約の リヴァイアサン

丈月城
illust: 仁村有志
Takeduki Joe

II

MF文庫



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丈月城
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「我が血の熱さを刃に変えて、
御身らを弑逆させていただく」

「なかなか
心躍る宣言だ。
気が昂ぶるぞ」

雪風
Yukikaze

「聞いたか姫よ。
こやつ、竜王ふたりに
牙をむくという」

ハンニバル
Hannibal

パヴェル・ガラド
Pavel Galad



「よ、要求が
厳しすぎませんか!？」

「いいからやるの!
このままだと、
あの唐変木を
ほかの女に取られるわよ!？」

強く叱咤されて、アーシャは必死に
感情を盛りあげようとした。

「ほう……」

どこかで自称悪魔が
ささやくのを聞きながら、

ハルは見た。

抜き放った銃の上に

《弓の秘文字》が降りかかり、

白金色に輝くのを。

Meiyaku no Leviathan Volume 02

Prologue

New York State, United States of America.

Then there was the great river flowing slowly across this land, the Hudson River.

The river island at the Hudson's mouth was called Manhattan, which used to be New York City's center and in a certain sense, the world's center as well.

A metropolis filled with towering skyscrapers, a central hub for economic and cultural prosperity —

But now, the buildings, residences and structures distributed throughout this island were all deserted. They were simply empty ruins. Amidst the silence shrouding the current Manhattan, it was hard to believe how bustling it had been in the past.

Nowadays, this vast collection of ruins was known to mankind as the dragon concession territory of Old Manhattan.

"Fufu. It has been a while, wind on the ground."

The devastated city should not have any people, but *she* made her appearance here.

This was the place formerly known as the Empire State Building, a high-rise structure standing out particularly from all the other skyscrapers. On top of the roof, which stood at 380m above ground, was the iconic 60m-tall antenna spire.

Standing on the roof, she was on the very edge where a further step forward would mean stepping onto air.

Calm and composed, she looked out towards the sky.

"Hmm. Despite my long absence, I still find my homeland to be the best."

She half-closed her eyes happily and murmured lightly.

At the same time, she confirmed the feeling of the wind blowing across her entire body. Her beautiful, long, black hair and the hem of her white one-piece dress fluttered in the wind while she tracked these movements with her gaze.

This sort of carefree behavior felt truly delightful.

She spontaneously smiled. However—

The height of this place was akin to the pinnacle of a super-tall structure. The blowing winds were howling gales. One would expect a young girl's delicate body to be blown away instantly.

Nevertheless, she was enjoying the wind while viewing the world below, leisurely observing the scenery of skyscrapers.

Categorized according to human races on the ground, the girl would be considered oriental. Roughly fifteen years of age. Her face exuded a sense of silent beauty akin to a snow fairy's...

Even the strong wind blowing at an altitude of 380m was unable to shake her balance.

In the past, she had challenged all sorts of mysterious realms, broken out of various predicaments, overcoming dangers among dangers. So long as the "protection" she had trained over this long journey remained, she would continue to stand imperishable and undefeated.

"That guy hasn't changed the slightest, still so attention seeking as always."

Discovering her old friend's figure on the far end of the sky, she smiled faintly with wryness.

The weather was quite sunny. One could not help but feel joy from the bottom of the heart just by standing under these clear skies. Out in the far distance, thick clouds could be seen floating leisurely.

However, a *fierce beast*, rivaling these clouds in enormity, was also flying majestically through the clouds.

The creatures known to contemporary humans as dragons.

The color of the dragon's scales and wings were crimson. The scales in the chest area were shaped into an armor-like exoskeleton. In addition, his hand was holding a big and long *spear*.

A spear that surpassed the giant dragon's length. The shaft portion was black while the spear tip exhibited a dark steel color—

This was precisely the majestic figure often sighted in New York State and neighboring areas, the flying dragon king whom the human world nicknamed "Red Hannibal."

However, the girl called out to him, flying in the distance, using the title known only to their kind.

"I came to meet my old friend, Flame Emperor!"

The girl simply exerted her throat a little, but that was already sufficient.

Thirty seconds later, the Flame Emperor vanished from the distant sky while at the same time, red dragon scales suddenly appeared overhead, blotting the sky above.

Using teleportation magic to traverse space, he arrived in the sky above Manhattan.

But his size was outrageous. Her beautiful eyebrows in a frown, she looked up at the massive number of red dragon scales extending across the sky. The red dragon king's body currently spanned kilometers in length.

Standing underneath, it was impossible to see the shape of his entire body.

"I know you like to put on flashy shows, so it doesn't bother me, but don't forget you have a guest who came all this way just to see you. It would only be proper manners to show your face."

'Hahahahaha! I see you are still shameless as ever, clearly the uninvited guest here!'

The instant the girl grumbled, the sky began to shake violently.

The giant red dragon laughed heartily, producing vibrations that shook the entire area. Not just the sky but even Manhattan's ground and its towering ruins were shaking noisily as well.

Only the girl's slender figure remained completely motionless.

'Princess! Princess Yukikaze! I shall be there in a moment. No need to be so impatient!'

Heaven and earth shook again. Then the dragon scales blotting the sky vanished completely.

Instead, one saw a descending dragon. Covered in red scales, carrying a spear, this figure could only belong to the being known as the Flame Emperor—nicknamed "Red Hannibal."

However, his body length had now adjusted to twenty meters or so.

There was not much point for dragons to take on such a gigantic form unless they desired to walk on the ground on their own legs.

Compared to his earlier appearance, a dragon's original size would be far more convenient to move around, after all. In spite of that, he was flying around in that ridiculously massive body, most probably intending to intimidate the humans in the lower realm.

Like the games of children, however...

This type of prank did not annoy her. She—Princess Yukikaze—grinned.

"Anyway, it's wonderful that you haven't changed particularly. I wouldn't feel like sitting down for a chat if you were swapped with gloomy guys like the Lightning Emperor or the Sea King. Indeed."

"Hahaha. It is my honor that the princess is satisfied!"

The girl in the white one-piece dress was sitting on the pinnacle of the Empire State Building.

Then there was the dragon king face to face with the girl, hovering motionlessly in the air with his giant wings spread out. What a bizarre combination—However, the parties involved started to chat nonchalantly.

"By the way, Flame Emperor."

"Wait. To be frank, recently, I have grown fond of the name the surface dwellers chose for me."

"Red whatever... Hannibal, isn't it?"

The Black Lightning Emperor lurking in Europe had also announced his title to the people of Earth.

In contrast, the Flame Emperor had simply introduced his name casually without making a big deal out of it. Hence, the humans had made up a nickname on their own, using this name to address the red dragon king.

"Flame Emperor is not a bad name, but it's too similar to that guy's... that utterly sinister and arrogant piece of work, the Black Lightning Emperor... It feels a bit—no, it feels extremely displeasing. I have felt that way since a long time ago."

Despite being a great dragon king, he was also a childish warrior.

Displaying this characteristic subtly, Hannibal aka the Flame Emperor explained sonorously. His voice was an astoundingly rich baritone.

"Furthermore, I heard that the general who originally bore this name was an amazing character. Burning and laying waste to an entire mighty empire with only one army under his command, his aspirations were ultimately doomed to failure..." muttered Hannibal as though savoring the famous general's life of hardship on the tip of his tongue.

"As a man and warrior, one ought to seek the meaning of life along that sort of path. Perpetual invincibility is an inane wish holding absolutely no value at all."

"Really? But I, Yukikaze, wish to win at all times, you know?"

Red Hannibal was the great hero who had maintained his position as the strongest in over tens of billions of battlefields.

In the end, he could no longer derive any attraction from the "mediocre result" of victory. But Princess Yukikaze was still young. It was impossible for her to reach his level of enlightened detachment.

"To be honest, I really hate losing."

"What a young little lass you are, Princess! You are no true warrior unless you can enjoy the pleasures of defeat!"

"Then allow me to ask you a question amidst your blathering. How many times have you met defeat in your life?"

"Hmm... Twice—No, probably once. No wait. Although there should be slightly more than that, I cannot quite recall. Allow me to think for a moment, Princess."

"King Hannibal. Even when compared among the ranks of the dragon kings, it is possible that you are the one closest to the title of the strongest."

Excessively bold in personality, sometimes overly careless, he was the leader of the dragons.

Very familiar with his sloppy ways, Princess Yukikaze spoke without mincing words, "The way I see it, you've never lost in your entire life, have you?"

"Hmm. Now that you say it, I think you could be right. Perhaps that really might be the truth. 'Winning without realizing it' once a battle begins, that is indeed my bad habit."

Hannibal sighed as though deeply regretful of his misconduct.

This seemed more like an emotional response coming from a human surface dweller than a member of dragonkind.

"Is there no one strong enough to pop out somewhere to threaten my hegemony? ...By the way, Princess, it is really quite difficult to speak when meeting in this manner."

After muttering quietly, the giant red dragon's impressive figure disappeared from the sky.

Then instead, a man with a massive physique appeared next to the princes on the Empire State Building.

A human. At least in appearance. Standing at roughly 190cm tall, he was quite muscular in build. A brawny man in his prime. With facial features that could be considered quite well-proportioned, there was an unbelievable sense of charm to him.

His attire consisted of a red long coat over a shirt and slacks. He would not look out of place walking around on the ground dressed like this.

"Good. This makes speaking much easier."

The towering man spoke in an astoundingly rich baritone voice. It was identical to Hannibal's voice.

The dragon king had transformed into this appearance by using extraordinary magic.

"However, Princess, are you still unable to transform into a dragon at will?"

"Yes, but what does it matter? If I encounter enemies I cannot handle without transforming, my body naturally turns into a dragon. There is no inconvenience at all."

As the youngest among the dragon kings, Princess Yukikaze was still not mature enough.

Hence, she had not completely mastered the super magic residing in her body and soul.

Nevertheless, it did not weigh on her mind. Like Hannibal, she was born as a "hybrid." Unlike those of pure blood, she did not find human appearances to be disgraceful.

"Let's talk about something else, King Hannibal. The dragonslaying bow seems to have surfaced."

"Oh, the power of dragonbane that had disappeared along with the Crimson Queen!"

"I came to pay you a visit only because I was thinking you might know something."

"You are very curious as the owner of the arrow standing as its pair, aren't you? My apologies, but I have no idea. You would best ask a certain human regarding such matters!"

Originally conversing in the guise of humans, the dragon kings spontaneously turned their gaze to the western sky in unison.

Because they had noticed the silhouette of a dragon flying from afar.

"One of the Zizou? How rare for dragonkind to venture into my city."

The race known to humans as elite dragons was what dragonkind referred to as the "Zizou" among themselves.

Dragons with intellect, capable of language and magic. The approaching Zizou had dragon scales of metallic silver. Bathed under the sunlight, the scales shone with silver luster.



Soon, he arrived in the sky above the Empire State Building.

"O Gildar, those have conquered the Road to Kingship to ascend gloriously to the thrones of true kings."

With his scales glittering silver-white, the dragon said, "Although I fully understand your vast accomplishments and authority, I still feel compelled to speak my mind. My name is Pavel Galad. Merely one of the Zizou at this moment, but I am also an impudent rebel who intends to defy the kings."

"Hoh? Did you hear that, Princess? This fellow wishes to challenge two dragon kings."

"Loud and clear. What an exciting declaration. I am getting all fired up."

The two dragon kings nodded simultaneously in response to the bold introduction.

Especially Princess Yukikaze. Realizing her lips were smiling naturally, she grinned even more. Without exception, she loved everything to do with adventure, challenge and conflict. That was her inborn personality.

Then turning her beautiful face, akin to a snow fairy's, towards Pavel Galad, she asked him, "Answer me, what is your reason for challenging us?"

"Nothing beyond ordinary. As one of the Zizou, I, too, am seeking the runes of dragonbane in my attempt to challenge the *Road to Kingship*, but my Heartmetal was damaged during my journey. Since it is incurable, I fear my life shall be ending soon."

Pavel Galad discussed his own death with indifference.

"Then it occurred to me that I should do something as a conclusion to my life. Including myself, all of the Zizou have sworn to become dragon kings, but I no longer have the time to actualize this wish. In that case, I might as well gamble everything to challenge dragon kings, possibly obtaining victory to seize a throne—"

"You wish to challenge royalty because you are unable to pursue the Road to Kingship to its conclusion, is that so? Silver Dragon!?"

Galad nodded firmly in response to Princess Yukikaze's gruff question.

"Precisely. Please allow me to turn hot blood into blades in this act of traitorous usurpation against the two of you."

"Haha! What a quick and decisive answer!"

The princess laughed happily with exhilaration surging in her heart.

"King Hannibal, leave this guy to me. I wish to personally send him to the underworld with a *dragonslaying arrow* to pierce his Heartmetal. This kind of man must die in heroic martyrdom, it is my responsibility—Yukikaze's—as a conqueror!"

"Hmm, Do as you wish if that is what you want. I have no objections."

The ensuing battle was not worth describing in detail.

Pavel Galad was an especially powerful member of dragonkind. In addition to expertise in magic, he also possessed an extremely resilient body and mind.

The princess took on his challenge squarely, even to the point of countering with a devastating blow to him instead.

It could not be considered a tough battle. Despite her youth, Princess Yukikaze was a dragon king, after all. A Zizou without *the power of dragonbane* could not possibly cause her any trouble.

Neither turning her body into a dragon nor summoning minions, she had defeated the silver dragon singlehandedly through her own strength and magic wand.

The battle lasted no more than a few minutes, probably. Utterly exhausted, Pavel Galad crashed to the ground—Central Park, the leisure facility for New York citizens in the past.

The park was quite vast with a number of lakes within its premises.

In the past, the park had been kept in excellent shape for people to enjoy a simulated form of nature, but now, the area was only occupied by unmaintained mixed forests and overgrown weeds spreading unchecked.

And above this park, Princess Yukikaze was currently hovering in the sunny sky.

"You have successfully engraved your valor in my—Yukikaze's—heart. Take this as a parting gift, Silver Dragon. For the sky to be so blue today, it is certainly a good day to die," said Princess Yukikaze as though singing an eulogy.

She was motionless, roughly ten meters above the ground. What allowed her to hover in midair was a streamlined board underfoot.

Surface dwellers would probably guess it was a type of surfboard based on its size and shape.

This was precisely the "magic wand" Prince Yukikaze used habitually.

Riding her white streamlined magic wand, the princess looked down at the ground below.

Pavel Galad's massive body was lying there. One strike from her *arrow* just now had pierced his silver-white chest to leave a huge gaping hole.

"I shall ask you once again. If you have any lingering regrets and wish to continue living, then become my possession. A warrior of your caliber is qualified to join my camp."

Pavel Galad simply lay on the ground without answering.

He was probably unable to make even a sound. But as though pleading "hurry up and deliver the final blow," he closed his eyes. Without uttering a single word, he conveyed his will clearly.

"Fufu. What remarkable resolve. What a remarkable final moment. I, Yukikaze, am impressed!"

The princess focused her thoughts so as to control the streamlined magic wand.

She wanted to end Galad's life in as harsh a manner as possible, so as to maximize the magnificence of this man's death. Hence, she must pour her full strength into the finishing blow—

The instant Princess Yukikaze swore to herself, her entire body heated up. This was the warning sign prior to turning into a dragon!

In response to her rising tide of emotion, her body was preparing to explode with the strongest power. Just as Princess Yukikaze intended to simply release her entire body's heat—

"Please wait, Lord," spoke a rather hoarse voice, sounding almost rusted.

It was a familiar male voice. Princess Yukikaze halted her dragon transformation and looked down at the ground again. A human had suddenly stood next to the collapsed silver dragon.

"What a nostalgic face. You've come."

"I appear anywhere as long as the need arises. This is my destiny. I will go everywhere be it the bottom of the ocean, Hyperborea in the heavens, or even the farthest ends of the universe, the Forgotten Realm beyond the astral gate."

The male acquaintance's wording was quite polite. Both his attitude and tone of voice were very respectful.

However, not the slightest bit of servility could be felt. Like an honest butler in service of a royal palace, he spoke with an aloof tone, carrying himself in an elegant and polite manner.

"Dedicating himself to the Road to Kingship, he has exhibited potential as a successor."

"Oh? In other words, this guy is your target today?"

The man nodded silently in response to Princess Yukikaze's question.

In the prime of life with tanned skin, he was dressed in an ordinary black suit that one could buy in any city. Matching his voice, his proper-looking facial features gave an impression of experienced competence.

"Precisely. During his long search, this dragon has obtained a flint."

"A fragment of the flint star? That's quite capable of him, to think he has already satisfied one of the requirements."

Princess Yukikaze felt satisfied to find out that Pavel Galad was an accomplished figure.

She had not misjudged him after all. Then she focused her gaze upon the man in the black suit again. Speaking of the devil, Hannibal had just mentioned "a certain human" earlier and now he was here.

Among those who were not dragon kings, this man was closest to the secrets of Ruruk Soun.

In other words—Princess Yukikaze saw through the man's intentions and smiled with a "hmph." At the same time, she gave up on the thought of delivering a finishing blow. All the excess heat vanished from her body instantly.

She suddenly jumped off the streamlined board. Landing firmly on the ground, she said, "Which rune do you intend to give this silver dragon?"

"If he wishes—This one."

The man in the black suit opened his hand to instantly reveal a secret rune of Ruruk Soun in the middle of his palm.

It was a magical symbol composed from three "<" inequality signs stacked in a straight line. Its shape was evocative of a sharp weapon.

It was undoubtedly a rune of dragonbane, infused with the power of dragonslaying.

After Princess Yukikaze nodded, the man in the red long coat also approached.

"Ohoh, how nostalgic. Isn't this the Rune of the Sword?"

Hannibal exclaimed in praise. Spontaneously, he landed on the ground in human form.

"I still remember the dragonslaying sword's sharpness quite well. Now that is one good rune!"

"So this is the situation, Pavel Galad."

The man in the black suit called out to the silver dragon still collapsed on the ground.

"If you can hear me, muster all strength available to you. If you succeed in grasping this, you will step upon the staircase to kingship. Become the dragonslaying sword's successor to challenge the Road to Kingship."

The man invited in a tone of voice that was too sincere to call diabolical.

Road to Kingship. As soon as these words were heard, the silver dragon instantly opened his tightly shut eyes.

"Naturally, conferring the power of dragonslaying to you comes with corresponding conditions. I hope you will first face the trial I present to you. If you have no objections to this covenant, extend your hand."

Pavel Galad's giant body suddenly shook once.

With his Heartmetal pierced, this body should not be capable of anything except waiting for the inevitable demise.

However, he slowly lifted a silver-white left hand stiffly. Bearing five fingers, this dragon palm reached bit by bit towards the man in the black suit.

This was the instant when the dying silver dragon accepted the covenant.

Chapter 1 - Spending Time After School with Witches

Part 1

Entering the latter part of April, spring was hanging in the air everywhere in Tokyo New Town.

On this spring day, the Kantou region's warm climate was providing comfortable sunny weather for days on end. However, a certain young beauty was scowling in the classroom of Year 1 Class F.

Anastasya Rubashvili. Nicknamed Asya.

The foreign student who had transferred in recently — That was her cover story. However, she had disassociated herself from "ordinary" schooling for many years already, because she was a witch constantly engaged in research all over Europe and also an expert on *magic* in the Metaphysical Body of Knowledge.

She even went through *training* in the army for a period of time. She was quite adept in close quarters combat and the use of firearms.

Regarding survival skills in all sorts of environments, her talent was highly acclaimed, even to the point that she was invited to participate in special forces training.

Indeed, adaptability in every kind of environment was Asya's special skill.

Only a few days had passed she started her life as a *high school girl*, enrolled in the same class as her childhood friend, Haruga Haruomi.

Nevertheless, Asya was already making full use of her handy adaptability.

Despite feeling lost on occasion, she spent her days happily for the most part.

Hence, feeling unaccustomed to the pressures of school life was not the reason for her unhappiness.

"Did you know!? I heard that Juujouji-san and Haruga-kun are planning to go on a trip this Golden Week! Of course, it'll be just the two of them!"

This. This was precisely the reason for Asya's agitation.

The gossip-loving Funaki-san was the female classmate who was striking up conversation with Asya.

"Th-There's this kind of rumor going around?"

Asya smiled artificially while trying hard not to let the displeasure in her heart leak into her voice.

"B-But even as Haruomi's childhood friend, I haven't heard anything about it. Isn't this kind of rumor too unreliable?"

"Oh my oh my, but this is a trip with a new *girlfriend*, you know?"

The gossip-loving Funaki-san offered her opinion while grinning from ear to ear. She was a petite girl with her hair tied up as twintails on the sides of her head. Furthermore...

"What kind of boy would actually report back to his childhood friend? I think Haruga-kun will definitely hide this sort of thing."

Despite her frivolous appearance, Funaki-san was unexpectedly perceptive.

Indeed, it was highly unlikely that Haruomi would publicize things of such nature. Asya agreed on this point.

"Since you know that, stop believing rumors that those two are an item..."

Asya could not help but start grumbling.

After transferring into Kogetsu Private Academy where her childhood friend and Juujouji Orihime were studying...

This rumor was the reason why Asya felt shocked and displeased.

It was also quite infuriating that those two, the subjects of the rumor, did not do anything about it. Haruomi and Orihime's explanation was "although we denied it outright, it was completely futile." Seeing as that was the case, the newly transferred Asya simply insisted "I don't know of anything like this. It's just a rumor!" However—

"The two of them are very shy, so they won't admit it publicly no matter what (according to Funaki-san)."

All Asya got were responses of this sort.

Today, while Asya was engaging in the Japanese custom of "eating one's lunchbox early" during break time, Funaki-san had approached her happily to bring the latest news.

Asya quietly closed her emptied lunchbox and came to a new understanding of one fact.

This was a type of information warfare. Compared to the truth, people were more inclined to accept rumors matching what they wanted to believe as true. Even lies, once dressed up seriously, could be taken as the truth.

No amount of denial would work on people who wanted to believe that Haruomi and Orihime were "going out."

In that case, Asya decided to disclose even more sensational news, to drown out the rumor that had already spread!

"— Actually, there's something I've kept a secret so far."

Asya feigned a serious expression and lowered her voice.

"Haruomi isn't just going out with Orihime-san. In fact, Haruomi also sends flirting glances my way secretly, to his childhood friend. He's double-timing scum, a terrible good-for-nothing!"

"You're so humorous~ Haruga-kun and Asya-san is the one pairing that's absolutely impossible."

However, Funaki-san dismissed it simply with a smile. Asya was rendered dumbstruck.

She thought Funaki-san would be drawn to this news and start spreading rumors without verification!

"This isn't a joke. It's not virtual reality either or something that happened in an online game. It's honestly the genuine truth, okay? It's what kids these days would call 'for reals yo!'"

"Ahaha, you speak excellent Japanese, Asya-san. But your comedy skills aren't up to par."

Funaki-san smiled cheerfully, still unconvinced by what Asya said.

"W-Why do you refuse to believe me!?"

"This is called a woman's intuition. A girl's sixth sense. I totally don't sense that kind of mood between Haruga-kun and Asya-san, that's why!"

"And what kind of mood is that!?"

"Hmm—the mood of a possible/imminent/current romantic relationship in progress."

"Good grief. Here I thought that my trailblazing and innovative tactic would correct people's erroneous ideas... I'm so disappointed."

Asya was wolfing down her jumbo-sized S lunch set while remarking poignantly.

She had gone to the student cafeteria during lunch together with Hal and Orihime. In addition, the "S" designation of the lunch set meant "special," featuring extra large mince cutlets, five pieces of fried chicken, boiled potatoes with butter, Neapolitan pasta whose serving size could hardly be called a side, as well as a massive bowl of rice topped with a huge amount of shredded cabbage.

"If that so-called innovative tactic were to succeed..."

Slurping a mouthful of kelp ramen noodles, Hal said:

"How much do you reckon my reputation would suffer? Asya, can I beg you to choose your battle plans a little more carefully?"

"But isn't taking responsibility the manly thing to do in a situation like this one?"

"However, it seems that Haruga-san is partly to blame for the plan's failure. After all, Haruga-san never takes initiative to talk to girls because he couldn't be bothered to take the effort," said Orihime in candor, criticizing Hal nonchalantly.

Raising her chopsticks to eat grilled pork with ginger sauce lunch set, she offered her opinion.

Furthermore, it was not coincidence that they were classmates. The school was founded with funding from SAURU and the organization evidently wanted to put all witch-related personnel together in one place.

"Let's make this clear first, Juujouji. People do believe that you're going out with this me you're describing."

"Is that so? ...Do we really look like such a great match?"

Orihime tilted her head in curiosity.

"On the contrary, I find that you get along with Asya-san much better."

"R-Really? Ahem. Orihime-san, please don't read anything special from this, but if you don't mind, have a piece of my fried chicken. My treat."

"Eh, is that really okay? Fufu, thank you. Then I'll enjoy the treat."

"But our situation is more like fate has bound us together for so long that the relationship has gone moldy. It's only natural for us to get along in one or two areas, so I don't think there's anything special here."

"H-Haruomi, please hand over that piece of braised pork, immediately!"

Thus, lunch at the student cafeteria was spent in this noisy manner. By the time the three of them were almost done eating, Asya showed a complicated expression on her face and suddenly whispered:

"Sigh, although it's a shame that people are getting the wrong idea about Haruomi's relationship with Orihime-san, apart from that, something else displeases me."

"Oh? How rare."

Hearing his childhood friend's grumbling, Hal felt surprised.

Asya's special skill was the ability to eat, sleep and live in any country under any environment as comfortably as her homeland, except Islamic regions during Ramadan.



"When transferring over here, I did prior research on student life in this country. Based on the data I gathered, I learned that Japanese educational institutes would customarily treat beautiful and refined female students as a kind of idol to be praised and worshiped."

"Did that data come from manga, anime or novels?"

"All of them. In fact, Orihime-san holds that particular position too."

"Me? Nothing of that sort. It's not like I am some sort of popular person."

"H-How can she make such an oblivious statement so readily again... Fine, forget that for now. Even so, I've yet to receive a single love letter in my shoe locker so far. Isn't that really bizarre?"

"Asya-san actually has a lovely personality..."

"Well, I think the problem lies in you, Asya. Like how you finish off two home-packed lunchboxes during the morning, then clean out a full-sized lunch set during lunch, you know? There's also cooking class last time when you tried to take the gardening club's rabbit as an ingredient for a stew."

"I-I thought they were kept at school as emergency rations! And I intended to pay properly for them!"

"The Gardening Club's Endou-san was crying that time..."

Just as Hal ridiculed her, Asya justified herself indignantly and Orihime provided her own innocent comment...

A very lively looking classmate, the short-haired girl named Mutou-san, was approaching the trio. She was precisely the culprit who had urged Hal and Orihime to join that "UFO Research Club" something or other.

"Oh, the two of you are here. The transfer student's with you too."

Relaxed as ever, Mutou-san spoke to them.

"Juujouji-san, you said you'd attend the UFO Research Club's regular meetings, right? There happens to be one today, wanna come? Harugakun, please come too if you're free."

"Today? Wonderful. I have no other arrangements for today. It's not a problem at all."

"Uh, let me see..."

Just as Hal was trying to find an excuse, Orihime kept staring intently at him and even added a tender smile. Hence, he recalled his earlier promise of "visiting together within the few days."

"...I happen to be free today too."

Orihime nodded with satisfaction. Feeling embarrassed, Hal scratched his head as a distraction.

Seeing that, Asya stood up forcefully for some reason.

"H-Haruomi, you guys are talking about joining club activities right? Can I come along!?"

"Wow, the transfer student wants to come too? Of course, I welcome you with open arms."

"I want to join the club while I'm at it! The numbers aren't full, right!?"

"No, of course not. Even if it were full, I'd ignore that fact. I'm so happy. Clearly we were still worrying about a lack of members earlier, but now the sixth member has come knocking on our door automatically."

Mutou-san grinned from ear to ear after listening to Asya's request.

Despite feeling puzzled by his childhood friend's overly sudden request to join the club, Hal still changed the subject.

"By the way, are there any boys in the UFO Research Club apart from me? There are three girls already with Mutou-san, Juujouji and Asya, right? It really feels a bit embarrassing if I'm the only boy..."

"Basically... The boy to girl ratio is a half, I guess."

After hearing this subtle answer, Hal frowned and repeated "basically?" Hence, Mutou-san added "There are five club members right now. The girls are me and Juujouji-san. The boys are Haruga-kun and someone else. So it happens to be a 2.5 to 2.5 ratio."

"...Umm, what is that '.5' supposed to mean?"

"To be frank, there's someone of unknown gender in the club."

" " "Unknown gender!?" " "

Hal, Orihime and Asya shouted in surprise simultaneously.

Part 2

Kogetsu Academy was situated at Ryougoku in the Sumida Ward. The campus was established roughly ten years ago.

Before the school's founding, the Tokyo region's population was in continual decline due to influences from the Tokyo Concession's establishment. Furthermore, multiple counts of dragon attacks had laid waste to various places.

At this rate, depopulation seemed inevitable.

However, the region was later designated for "redevelopment" as the new capital. During the same period, a new school was established.

Thanks to that, land was easy to obtain, resulting in a campus much bigger than for most schools.

Although the academy included middle and high school divisions, both school buildings were located in the same premises. With a mixed forest scattered throughout, the experience was akin to "having a picnic in a vast park" when taking a stroll inside the campus.

"The sports ground is very large, so the students in athletic clubs are very happy."

"However, the cultural clubs seem to disagree. The ten-minute-plus walk from the school building to the clubrooms seems like such a pain," replied Hal to Orihime while recalling their journey here.

One was confronted by a mixed forest immediately after stepping out of the high school division's building. Only after traversing one of the paths and moving along the baseball field's edge would one finally arrive at a pair of adjacent school buildings built from steel-reinforced concrete...

This was the location of the library and the cultural clubs building.

The former was exactly what its name implied. The latter was a building entirely occupied by rooms for cultural clubs.

The clubs building had a total of four floors. The UFO Research Club was located on the third floor. Hal, Orihime and Asya had gone out of their way to pay a visit.

"We're finally here. The place with the crossdresser of legend..."

"What are you talking about, Asya? Crossdresser?"

Hearing his childhood friend's murmurs, Hal could not help but ask.

"Didn't Mutou-san mention it? The UFO Research Club's president is of unknown gender. I'm thinking that's a reference to those crossdressers you find in every Japanese school."

Asya made a knowing look to show off her vast(?) knowledge.

"Born male but prettier than a girl, surely a creature of such cheating proportions. Perhaps dressed in a maid uniform too."

"I don't know whether that should be called cheating or simply belonging to the 2D world..."

"Mutou-san also mentioned that this person serves as president for five clubs, didn't she?"

Orihime also interjected with interest.

"The UFO Research Club, the Drama Club, the Mass Media Research Club, the Literature Club, the Science Scoop Club... A total of five cultural clubs, and a person of unknown gender to boot... It feels quite interesting."

"Anyway, it's definitely not someone who lacks individuality," muttered Hal. He recalled Mutou-san's explanation.

'That person—Rather than listen to my half-baked description, it's better if you saw with your own eyes. The president's family name is Maeda, but because she's too amazing, everyone calls her President M.'

'Why an initial?'

'Because no one dares address her by name directly. That's what you call proof of respect, right?'

Mutou-san was already waiting at the clubroom. Hal and the others entered the clubs building.

They climbed up the stairs, advanced along the hallway then knocked on the door labeled "UFO Research"...

"Oh, you've arrived. Come in, come in."

Just as Hal and the others entered the clubroom, welcomed by Mutou-san, over there was—

"Great that you have all come, I am M," said the eccentric who referred to herself with an initial.

President M was dressed in a black female outfit resembling maternity wear. Her figure was quite plump and she looked roughly 140kg.

Hal was reminded of doguu—earthen figurines dating back to prehistoric Japan's Jōmon Period. Some have speculated that the doguu were "maternal" symbols.

President M had pale skin and round eyes, but was absolutely not someone you would describe as beautiful.

"You are the newest club members, aren't you? Please visit me in the future whenever you have time. Even if I am not in this clubroom, I will surely be somewhere within the clubs building."

A husky and rich voice. It was reminiscent of both a male's falsetto and a noblewoman's voice.

In other words, what was commonly called an effeminate man... Maybe? Besides, was this person actually female? Just as Hal pondered the complexities of gender differences, Orihime inquired:

"You mentioned you might not be here... Is that due to going to other clubs?"

Even when confronted with an eccentric, she could still carry a conversation very naturally. This impressive adaptability was truly befitting of Juujouji Orihime.

"Indeed. As the president, I am obliged to look after everyone belonging to my clubs like a mother. That is why I have to rush all over the place."

"Mother!? Did you just say mother!?"

"Yes. The chosen ones in possession of power must take on responsibility commensurate with their abilities. That is why I must protect and guide everyone."

President M's statements had too many problems but Hal could not be bothered to nitpick. Orihime nodded in apparent awe and surprise. The president's sense of presence probably convinced her thoroughly.

Of the various points of doubt, the greatest was whether President M was an effeminate man or a girl. Since she had described herself as a "mother," Hal decided he might as well treat mother as the gender. After rapidly reaching this realm of enlightenment, Hal greeted:

"Although I won't really need you to look after me, I look forward to getting along with you."

"Oh... Really? So you are that kind of child."

"Huh?"

"It seems that you've got a troublesome personality and you won't open your heart to others immediately."

"....."

"But no matter. One day, you too shall realize my love and feel grateful to me. Offering silent yet powerful support is a mother's role, after all."

President M spoke in an aloof tone of voice. To think that this kind of eccentric also existed in a Japanese high school—

Just as Hal was feeling deeply impressed, Asya broke her silence.

"By the way, excuse me. I'd like to join the club too. Is this alright with procedures?"

She spoke very calmly, completely unfazed by President M's unusual qualities.

There were many eccentrics among certified master-class witches, hence Asya was probably accustomed to them.

"Once I join the club, that will put me in the same position as Haruomi and Orihime-san, which means we can stay together openly and I won't get excluded just because you two are attending a club. Fufu."

"Oh, please give me a second."

President M stopped Asya who was smiling calmly.

"The UFO Research Club huh... The required five members are already filled. Right now, the Literature Club needs help with the member count. Why don't you join the Literature Club?"

"W-What are you talking about? I'm not interested in that kind of club, okay?"

"It will be more convenient for you too. Well... I shall explain about that side in greater detail. Follow me!"

Like a gigantic whale breaking the surface of the ocean to emerge, President M moved with a whoosh.

Despite her massive build, her movements were quite fast. Like a flash flood in the mountains after heavy rain, President M charged towards the clubroom's door with a rumble. And by the time she realized, Asya found herself towed by the hand.

"Eh? W-Wait up, President!? I don't need to hear that kind of explanation—!"

It was futile even if she objected. Thus, Asya was forcibly dragged out of the clubroom.

Too great a difference in bodyweight. Unless she invoked Muscle Enhancement magic, the childhood friend whose figure was as delicate as a fairy's had no hope of winning against the president.

"The rest of you, just kill time as you wish!"

Leaving this command, President M departed.

"W-What exactly is this place?"

"The Literature Club's room. However, I am the sole member as president."

Asya had been taken to a room on the far end of the clubs building's third floor.

A steel bookcase was against the wall with a great number of novels and manga arranged on it.

"I have reasons why I must join the UFO Research Club no matter what."

Although President M was quite a bizarre eccentric, Asya was not afraid at all. In the process of interacting with her fellow witches, Asya had become accustomed to dealing with this type of person.

"I appreciate your invitation to join, but unfortunately, it doesn't seem like we were fated to—"

"If you refuse to join no matter what, I won't force you... But are you sure? If you stay in the same club as that girl, more than likely, you are going to lose."

Hearing something so fishy sounding, Asya tilted her head in puzzlement. Going to lose?

"You don't want Haruga to be snatched away by that Juujouji girl, do you?"

"!?"

Asya was speechless. They had only met President M for less than ten minutes. How did she know all this?

However, Asya could not bring herself to admit it, hence she desperately searched for words.

"Nothing of that sort. Please don't say such nonsense."

"Fufufu... I know all of it, because I possess a special power that ordinary people lack."

"Special power!?"

President M had whispered something that would fit right in a superhero action film.

On that round and surprisingly charismatic face, Asya could definitely see a seductive smile.

"Indeed. Using my skill, Feeling Love, reading and interpreting a love situation of that level is a piece of cake!"

"Even if you call it a love situation or whatever, I completely fail to understand what you mean."

"To put it bluntly, I am talking about your maidenly feelings that does not want your man, more than a friend but less than a lover, to be snatched away!"

"Kyahhhhhhh!"

Her internal thoughts and feelings utterly exposed, Asya could not help but scream in the end.

Skill—Was that referring to a discerning eye that could spot openings in human relationships through excellent perception? Asya was gradually swallowed by President M's pressure.

"I can see many other things too... At your very core, you seem to have a loser's personality, basically acting very 'forceful' for the most part but turning into a coward at critical moments..."

"Ouch! This sharp blade of words is stabbing deeply into my heart!"

"Even if this sort of half-baked carnivorous cowardly girl were to participate 'forcefully' in club activities with him, the end result will be no different from before. No, because there is that girl, as bright as the sun, acting as a foil, I fear the result will be even worse."

"Owwwwwww!"

"In that case, I will take this opportunity to invoke another skill, Wedding Eye, to predict your future... I see it, your future self twenty years from now."

"If you're just going to rub salt into the wound, please keep your words to yourself."

"...Although the occupation is unknown, you look like you'll be a overachieving career woman twenty years from now. As a woman with outstanding achievements in her career, you spend each and every day productively. But when you return to the condo you recently bought, there is not a soul waiting at home... Emptiness and loneliness occupies your heart the whole time. Your only distraction is alcohol..."

"Sob..."

"Oh dear, your twenty years older self seems to have a great collection of red wine. With a special wine cellar, you must be making bank... Still, rather than marrying a weird man, perhaps ownership of wealth might turn out to be a happier life..."

"Your realistic descriptions make me feel like it will really happen, so please, have mercy on me!"

Taking a heavy blow, Asya could not help but collapse on the Literary Club's floor, clutching her head.

"I-I can't help it. It's not like I know how to express myself fully..."

With depressed feelings, Asya began to draw circles on the floor tiles with her index finger.

"Haruomi is a dense blockhead while Orihime-san is able to nurture affection through her naturally airheaded personality. That's why I wanted to join in club activities together at least..."

"Your decision is basically sound."

President M placed her head on Asya's shoulder and spoke.

"What you lack is the sensuality, luck, judgment, vitality, acting skills, perceptiveness and self-expression abilities required to bring out your hidden potential..."

"H-Hold on, that's going too far. You're making me sound like I have no merits whatsoever."

"No helping it, both your feminine charm and romance standard score are too low."

"Sob sob sob..."

"However, your arrival here can be considered fate. If you are willing to follow me... I could train you up properly."

"—President! Why are you willing to do so much for me!?"

Asya forcefully looked up and asked, prompting President M to exhale forcefully through her nose with a "hmm-hmm."

"Didn't I say this already? It is my mission to protect and guide all my club members!"

Unaware that this encounter would end up being a turning point in her life, Asya could only stare in astonishment at President M's intrepid face.

Meanwhile, in the UFO Research Club's room after the president and Asya had left...

"It suddenly feels so quiet..." muttered Hal with deep feeling.

"Anyway, I guess the president's gender can be find out with a bit of investigation."

"Indeed. After all, the school has physical examinations too."

Orihime nodded in agreement with Hal, but Mutou-san shook her head.

"This is what's strange about this school. The administration provides maximum accommodation if someone wants to hide this type of personal information, keeping it undisclosed as long as the person in question refuses to release it. Haven't you noticed that there's even a washroom for a 'third sex' in school?"

"Now that you mention it, I remember high schools in Thailand are apparently the same..."

Hal decided not to pursue the matter. Instead, he started to examine the clubroom again.

This was a room that could be found in any high school, not particularly spacious, completely devoid of individuality. In the center, six desks were arranged to form rectangle and serve as a conference table.

However, the room was quite well-equipped.

There were two desktop PCs and two laptops. There was also a computer commonly used in the publishing industry, manufactured by a certain company whose symbol was a red fruit. In addition, there was an inkjet printer and a laser printer that were capable of printing A3-size documents, camera-type devices, what appeared to be reference books, and many files...

"How on earth did a high school club get all this stuff?"

"I heard that they were either donated by generations of club members or obtained through President M's connections."

Mutou-san answered Hal's question.

Since the president had gone off, she was the only club member present who knew what club activities were about. Hence, Orihime asked:

"By the way, there is another boy apart from Haruga-kun, right? Is he not around?"

"Oh, you mean Sakuraba-senpai. I think you won't have much chance of meeting him."

"Is he a ghost member?"

"Exactly the opposite. It's because he immediately leaves school every day to gather information on dragons as soon as lessons are over."

The UFO Research Club's mission was to collect news about UFOs, i.e. dragons, then disseminate widely to the masses.

Sakuraba-senpai was apparently quite zealous in these activities.

"From what I've heard, he's the complete opposite of a shut-in and never goes home obediently. But that's exactly why he's able to get his hands on all kinds of astounding scoop. For example—"

Mutou-san pulled one of the laptops on the table closer.

Flipping the screen open to activate the system from sleep mode, she presented a certain photo to Hal and Orihime.

"This is a 'serpent' that has never been discovered in the Kantou region before, possibly a 'new type.' That was what Sakuraba-senpai wrote in the activity report."

It was a photo depicting a wild beast. Hal was greatly surprised. Orihime most likely felt the same.

Its fur was white but reflective portions were glowing with crimson light. Its appearance was a hybrid between a wolf and a fox. The most striking characteristic consisted of the nine long thick tails—

It was the mighty visage of the recently born leviathan and Orihime's partner, Akuro-Ou.

Part 3

"That Research Club turns out to be a gathering of many people even stranger than imagined..."

"Yeah, it's quite surprising..."

Hal and Asya exchanged opinions with heartfelt emotion.

Their visit to the UFO Research Club had taken place a few days earlier. April was finally reaching an end while Golden Week had started. Today was also a holiday, which was why the two of them had been walking in a residential neighborhood within the Kōtō ward since morning.

"Right. In the end, Asya, you still joined the Literature Club, but is that really okay?"

"I have thought over that a lot too. Just watch, I will take this chance to reinvent myself."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Fufufu. Haruomi, you'll understand sooner or later..."

The two of them arrived in front of a certain Shinto shrine then passed through a torii gate to enter its premises. The place was quite vast but they did not see the person they were supposed to meet.

Just as Hal and Asya were looking around next to the worship hall and offering box, someone called out to them:

"Haruga-kun, over here!"

Hal looked in the voice's direction. Some distance away from the worship hall was a wooden building.

It looked like a dojo. Orihime was leaning out a window and waving to them. Instantly, Hal's eyes widened in surprise. This was...!

Today, Orihime was dressed in neither school uniform nor casual clothing.

Instead, it was what one would call a shrine maiden outfit. Traditional Japanese attire with a white top paired with a scarlet hakama. The fabric was flimsy while her voluptuous figure was highly attractive. Furthermore, Orihime was leaning forward greatly through the window, fully emphasizing her body's uncontrolled curves. Hal suddenly smiled.

If Hal were to look into a mirror this moment, perhaps he might find the reflection of a nihilistic smile belonging to a perfect villain.

"Haruomi...? It's rare for you to make such an intense expression, what's the matter?"

"No, it's nothing. Juujouji is waiting for us, let's hurry."

Asya questioned with a puzzled look but Hal swept the issue under the rug nonchalantly and swiftly made his way to the dojo.

It was a wooden building with a venerable air of majesty. Its ancient atmosphere nurtured a sense of staid stability. As they entered, the one who came to greet them was not Orihime but another shrine maiden.

"Nice to see you again. Sorry for causing trouble for you last time..."

Orihime's younger cousin, the leviathan Minadzuki's covanantee, as well as Hal's underclassman in the middle school division.

This petite girl, dressed as a shrine maiden, was named Shirasaka Hazumi.

She hastily lowered her head and bowed. Hazumi had been taken hostage by Soth. After the battle, she had to be hospitalized briefly to be examined. During her stay at the hospital, Hal and Asya had visited her only once, under Orihime's lead. This was their first time meeting again after that.

"Is your health fine now?"

"Yes, I am fine... But Minadzuki is still —"

In a coma after Soth *drank her blood*, Minadzuki still showed no signs of recovery as yet.

Hazumi bowed her head sadly after answering Asya's question.



A single glance was enough to tell that Hazumi had a very gentle personality. Hal found himself somehow unable to gaze at her directly, so he turned to face Orihime as though to hide his embarrassment.

"By the way, why are you dressed as shrine maidens today?"

"Because I am working here for the morning. Both Hazumi's and my family are parishioners of this shrine, so we are occasionally asked to take on shrine maiden jobs."

Hal nodded after listening to her explanation. Orihime and Hazumi's shrine maiden look definitely did not look like cosplay. He got the feeling that they were very used to wearing such outfits.

"In fact, the mirror we used in the ritual last time was found thanks to the goodwill of people on the shrine side."

"Oh I see, you mean what was used for Akuro-Ou's heartmetal."

"Since we're going to discuss witch matters, it's not like we could sit down and talk over tea in a nearby shop, right? That is why I borrowed this dojo."

"It feels quite weird for a shrine to have a dojo."

Hanging on a wall in the dojo was a scroll reading "Katori Daimyojin," very heavy looking wooden swords, staves of various lengths, paginates made of wood, etc, contributing to a very solemn atmosphere.

"Is this where they hold something like sword training?"

"Yes. During the late Shogunate period, the shrine's chief priest was a master of Ono-ha Ittō-ryū, the Ono school's one-sword style. It was said that he built this dojo after he had attained full mastery of the art. I also learn kendo here."

"Eh, you too?"

"Orihime-neesama has been widely praised for her ability since a long time ago."

Hazumi smiled demurely.

Her smiles were still so strikingly memorable.

Perhaps one could say her smiles were extremely dazzlingly. In particular, the sense of transparency was shocking. Even Hal forgot his earlier embarrassment and could not help but gaze intently.

Still, he felt a bit uncomfortable. To disguise these feelings, Hal asked a question:

"Uh... By widely praised, do you mean she entered a competition or something?"

"Yes, she has *also* entered those types of competitions. Nee-sama has been training in kendo until she graduated middle school, even emerging victorious in a national competition once."

Probably happy to discuss Orihime's excellence, Hazumi was showing a gentle.

It was not a fake smile put on intentionally.

In terms of purity, it was 100% sincere. Just by reading her expression, one could tell that she truly loved her older cousin.

Confronted with her dazzling smiling face, Hal scratched his head and was overwhelmed with the urge to look away.

That being said, there were questionable points to what she had just said.

"Excuse me, Hazumi-san? There's something I don't quite understand," Asya asked, apparently noticing the same issue.

"Apart from 'those types' of official competitions, what other matches can determine ability? Sorry, I'm not too familiar with sports in Japan."

"Ah yes. Actually, I'm not too sure either."

While Hazumi was answering, Hal turned his gaze to the person in question.

Orihime took down a wooden sword that was hanging on the wall and said "wow, this sure brings back memories" as though she had not heard their conversation. It was definitely too unnatural.

Hal's suspicions turned to certainty. Hazumi's next words reinforced his notion.

"But as a child, Nee-sama has always been 'a girl stronger than any boy.' This was well-known in the neighborhood. I heard that there were even skilled boys who deliberately came from neighboring areas to challenge her."

"Coming to challenge her... So picking fights, basically?"

As soon as Hal muttered, Hazumi hastily shook her head.

"F-Fights!? Nothing of that sort. Nee-sama always called them 'an honest match' or 'a fair and square contest,' you know?"

"Those can all be interpreted as 'fights.'"

"Ehhh?"

Nodding at Hazumi, who had jumped in surprise, Hal then looked at Orihime.

The former kendo girl, who had deliberately altered her image, smiled as though she had been caught red-handed.

"Oh dear, everyone was so mischievous back in elementary school. Even then, someone like me already graduated from all such affairs by sixth grade, before advancing to middle school."

"That seems a bit late in terms of graduating."

"I only took on boys who bullied the weak and I never used a bamboo sword just because I was learning kendo. At most, I only employed judo techniques that Grandfather had taught me personally."

"In your own way, you were also bullying the weak."

"In any case, the title of the chivalrous 'Kotengu of Fukakawa' that circulated around was referring to me. As a hero of justice, I guess I could be called Anba-Tengu too."

"You picked that nickname yourself, right? Making references to tengu in this day and age, that's really in your style."

Speaking of which, Orihime had claimed before that contrary to appearances, she was actually quite good at fighting.

Her grounds for making such a claim was apparently based on this childhood phase of hers as well as her victory in a national kendo competition.

"Fine, fine, it's all in the past anyway. I don't practice kendo anymore due to working as a witch," Orihime finished lightheartedly then gazed at everyone's face in turn.

"By the way, I have something to report to all of you. I met Yukari-san yesterday... and she casually asked about how Akuro-Ou was born."

" "Ugh." "

Hiiragi Yukari held an executive position in the research organization SAURU and at the same time, she was also the technical consultant in charge of all witches in the Kantou region.

There was no way to evade her discerning eye after all? Hal and Asya groaned together.

"After all, the way Akuro-Ou suddenly joined the battle last time was too unnatural..."

"In any case, I managed to pull through using the explanation we agreed on: 'By the time I realized, Akuro-Ou's spirit had come to me. We tried to conduct the ritual and it succeeded.'"

"Will Hiiragi-san believe it?"

"Even if we reported the truth, it's hard to say whether she'll trust me."

Hinokagutsuchi, the Rune of the Bow, the special ritual of Akuro-Ou's birth—

Too many mysteries. The power of the rune was too great. There was no way to predict how things would unfold if they were to report everything recklessly. All Hal could see in front of him were tricky matters of this sort.

Before more information was gathered, they should adhere to strict confidentiality for now.

"However, Hiiragi-san should be busy at the moment, trying to find a new location to move the Mansion, so she probably won't pursue the matter seriously for now... I hope," Asya said.

The reclaimed land at Shin-Kiba had turned into a battlefield last time. During the battle, flames discharged by Raak Al Soth had fallen upon the Witch Mansion there.

In the end, the fire had gone on to incinerate the building completely because it was not extinguished in time.

Fortunately, the vault was underground so the large number of grimoires and magical apparatus had remained safe.

Headed by Hiiragi-san, involved personnel were currently busy running all over the place to secure a place to serve as a temporary Mansion and move these items over.

"Speaking of which, that Hinokagutsuchi hasn't shown up lately."

Hal recalled the self-styled devil who had a habit of hiding.

Despite her ways, she was also a valuable source of information. Hal wanted to talk to her occasionally.

"First, let's start by going through Pops' materials to investigate about that stone."

The magical stone hidden in his father's effects. The stone that Hinokagutsuchi had called the flint.

Through what kind of channels had Hal's father, Haruga Takafumi, obtained it? Hal decided to begin his investigation from this point.

Part 4

"No matter what, meals are the most important. There's a Japanese proverb that says you can't fight wars on empty stomachs, so let's have lunch. I'm famished."

With extra emphasis added at the end, Asya's declaration brought an end to the discussion.

After waiting for Orihime and Hazumi to change into casual clothing, the group went to a nearby park. Taking over a table that happened to be empty in the resting area, they began to have lunch.

"Today I brought a specially prepared Chinese-style lunch. Chinese cooking is one of my specialties, so please enjoy, everyone!"

Probably quite confident in the food's flavor, Asya announced with pride.

Back when he heard Asya say "I made lunch for today!" earlier, Hal wondered if he should run to the pharmacy to pick up some indigestion medication first.

In contrast, a fresh face had eyes shining brightly in anticipation.

"Really? Wow, I'm so excited."

That was Hazumi. Her clear eyes were truly infused with extremely bright light.

"Asya-san is really talented in cooking. I am positive it will be very delicious," Orihime further incited Hazumi's expectations. Despite having eaten Asya's "home cooking" at the Haruga house once before, Orihime smiled cheerfully. She probably thought the menu and portions just happened to be very "substantial" at the time.

Then Asya finally unveiled the packed lunch she had brought.

"These sticky rice dumplings were left over from yesterday. You can choose between fillings of braised pork, sweet potato, mountain vegetables, or braised beef... Anyway, all kinds of flavors."

"That's amazing! What a feast!"

"There's also *youlinji*—Chinese-style deep-fried chicken. The sweet and spicy sauce is a special recipe I came up with after research and experimenting. Make no mistake, you won't be able to taste this flavor anywhere else. Ehe."

"To think you went that far!?"

"Then there's *huiguo rou*—twice-cooked pork, mapo eggplant, mapo doufu, shrimp and squid stir fry, and *pidan*—thousand-year-old egg. In addition, there's very simple stuff like fried beansprouts, fried pea sprouts, fried water spinach. Spring rolls, *qingjiao rousi*—stir fried pork and green peppers, steamed chicken with chop suey..."

Wham, wham, wham, Asya brought out food repeatedly.

The container was a seven-layered stackable box set that had made her so touched that she exclaimed "I can't believe there's a lunch box with so many layers!" and instantly purchased it upon seeing it at the food utensil section of a Japanese department store.

Every vegetable dish was shiny due to her use of the Chinese cooking technique of deep-frying food to partially cook it before subjecting it to further stages of cooking.

Perfect visual and olfactory presentation, intensely rich flavors, so many dishes that they almost overflowed the table, such was precisely Asya's Chinese cooking. Orihime widened her eyes.

Then seemingly with a pensive expression of total comprehension, she nodded.

"Speaking of which, Asya-san seems to say she's hungry quite frequently..."

"Amazing... A-Are we able to finish all of this...?"

On the other hand, although Hazumi had initially gazed at Asya with touched emotions and respect...

Confronted with Asya's portions and variety, even she could not hide her wavering. However, she suddenly looked up with a determined expression and said in strong tone of voice:

"U-Umm, it looks very delicious. I will try my best!"

"Fufufufu. Bon appetit. Don't be shy and start tasting without delay."

"Y-Yes!"

Hazumi, nodding firmly, and Asya, who had overestimated other people's appetites.

Although they were both petite girls, they stood in stark contrast to each other.

Still, Hazumi was truly brave. Unlike Hal who had quickly concluded it was impossible to finish, she encouraged herself to eat all the food no matter what.

Surely, she must think that it would be disrespectful to Asya if there were any leftovers.

What a good girl—Thinking that, Hal started lunch too. During times like these, Hal would limit himself to eating an amount that would not strain his digestive system, but today, he might possibly have to stuff his stomach to the limit.

"Oh right. I recently heard a rumor about Haruomi and Orihime-san having plans to go on a private trip during Golden Week."

"Me and Juujouji? When did this kind of rumor start spreading...?"

"C-Cough."

"Are you alright, Nee-sama!?"

Hazumi handed a bottle of green tea to Orihime who had suddenly choked.

Meanwhile, Asya sharpened her gaze while swallowing a mouthful of deep-fried chicken.

"This reaction... Is the rumor's source actually a grave you dug yourself, Orihime-san?"

"W-What grave? Nothing of that sort. Listen to me, Asya-san—"

"Oh, I see what caused it. There was one time when Juujouji came to me very suddenly to ask if I could find air tickets for 'a three-day-two-night trip to either Korea or Taiwan' for the holiday next week. Now that I think back in detail, there were classmates around at the time."

"I was thinking that I could definitely secure round-trip tickets at least if I relied on Haruga-kun's shady connections..."

"Well, if you don't mind a smuggler's ship, I could arrange one for you, but please be aware that they don't set sail on a date and route at your convenience."

"Y-You know those kinds of people?"

Hazumi stared wide-eyed, prompting Hal to answer "yeah" ambiguously.

If one were to use an analogy of black and white, Hal would be living comfortably in the gray area approaching black. He definitely did not dare display his true nature in front of a "good girl" like her.

On the other hand, Hazumi was impressed for some reason and quietly whispered:

"Smugglers... I read about them on news occasionally. So I see..."

"Oh no, that won't work, Hazumi. I can't let you cross borders using that kind of method. I was thinking of using this rare chance to take her traveling abroad."

"Eh!? Take me traveling!?"

"Yes. Think about it, Minadzuki is currently in convalescence. And you've never gone traveling ever since you became a witch, right? That's why I suddenly got the idea that I might as well make use of this holiday to take you traveling."

"Nee-sama..."

"Are you sure you want to take a girl like her on an overseas trip with a densely packed itinerary when she's not used to long journeys?"

"Well, I just wanted to try asking first. If you could book a itinerary that seems nice, I would then recommend it to Hazumi—Oh, a call from Yukari-san."

Orihime took out her suddenly ringing cellphone from her bag.

Then she placed placed her phone on the center of the table.

Displayed on the LCD screen was Hiiragi Yukari's photo. Wearing red-rimmed glasses, her appearance was that of an intellectual beauty. However, that inexplicably weary gaze of hers was very striking.

"What's the matter, Yukari-san? Asya-san and Hazumi happen to be here too."

After picking up the call using speakerphone, Orihime started the conversation.

Somehow, they had apparently developed a straightforward relationship eschewing the use of polite language.

Hal was told that prior to becoming a witch, Orihime had sought out Hiiragi-san to talk many times. Especially after Akuro-Ou's birth, the two of them probably met every three days.

'That's wonderful. It's quite sudden but I'm afraid it's bad news, okay?'

Hiiragi-san cut straight to the chase and dispensed with pleasantries.

'Nine Raptors seem to be moving west on the Pacific currently, having broken past the defensive line at Ogasawara Islands. Judging from their route of advance, they are expected to reach the Kantou region. Since the situation could escalate into an emergency, I would like to request Orihime-san to make preparations for interception.'

"Nee-sama and Asya-san left."

Hazumi remarked quietly in sadness, because her partner Minadzuki was still in "convalescence."

In contrast, Asya departed together with Orihime, leaving the half-eaten lunch behind.

Like Hazumi's, her partner was also in poor shape. Nevertheless, she was in charge of supporting Orihime who was still inexperienced.

"It feels so strange now when I still had to mobilize not so long ago..."

Left in the park together with Hal, Hazumi's countenance darkened in worry.

In the middle of tidying up the leftovers of the Chinese lunch, Hal stopped what he was doing and said:

"Akuro-Ou is a 'serpent' that's so strong that it doesn't resemble a newborn. Also, Asya went with them too. Even if they're fighting Raptors, I don't think there'll be much risk."

Actually, there was an attached condition of "accidents could happen any time."

Of course, Hal did not say it out loud. Hence, the younger witch suddenly smiled at him. Her smile was a bit stiff with a reduced sense of transparency compared to usual.

"I suppose... you are right. Very well. I've decided to believe in Nee-sama and Asya-san too. Just like you, Haruga-san."

Hazumi's smile seemed a bit forced.

Apparently noticing Hal's consideration for her, she tried to comfort him instead, telling him not to worry about her. Caught directly in Hazumi's candid gaze, Hal really could not get his mind to settle down.

It felt rather uncanny. Due to Hazumi's excessive obedience, Hal felt intimidated instead.

Hal found Hazumi to be someone very difficult to deal with, but in a completely different way compared to Orihime.

"However, what Hiiragi-san said just now was very concerning. I heard that there are dragons flying into other places apart from the Kantou region..."

Hazumi showed a slightly solemn expression again. This news was part of what Hiiragi-san had told them.

'Although we are currently still gathering information, the various islands are apparently under attack from flocks of Raptors. Simultaneously. All personnel involved in Japan's domestic defense are apparently bickering fiercely over the matter. If a solution is found to take care of the Raptors flying towards the Kantou region, Orihime-san might need to be dispatched to regions that are lacking manpower.'

"Dragon Strikes" launched by lesser dragons, Raptors.

Such attacks were supposed to happen sporadically. It was essentially impossible for flocks of dragons to coordinate with one another in advance to attack predetermined locations in an organized manner.

The only exception was when elite dragons were involved—

At this moment, a certain pompous girl suddenly spoke up:

"Hmm... The flavors are not bad, reaching a passing standard, but I would really like an alcoholic beverage to rinse away the grease in my mouth. The humans who offered tribute to me in the past were never negligent in this aspect."

Hal looked in the direction of the voice. Without him noticing, a girl in a kimono had sat down next to him.

The scarlet attire was reminiscent of crimson flames. Her black hair was tied with a red ribbon. Despite her appearance as a cute little girl, her true identity was an elite dragon's ghost—

Hinokagutsuchi nimbly delivered *qingjiao rousi* into her mouth using chopsticks.

"You... can still eat?"

"I seldom eat or drink because it is not essential. By the way, brat, I smell a powder keg on earth."

Meanwhile, meeting the scarlet-clad ghost for the first time, Hazumi stared wide-eyed.

Even so, she opened her mouth while suppressing her surprise, perhaps intending to greet Hinokagutsuchi. However, Hinokagutsuchi waved her hand with customary arrogance to stop Hazumi.

"Little shrine maiden, I already know your background and you must have heard about me too. In that case, fresh introductions are unnecessary. Too much of a hassle."

"Y-Yes. I have heard from Nee-sama and others about you already."

"Naturally, if you feel compelled to kneel and prostrate yourself in awe of my disposition as a noble queen, I shall not prevent you."

"!? You are—a queen!?"

"Fufufufu. It is a thing of the past."

Hal wondered if Hazumi's innocence had piqued her interest, but Hinokagutsuchi seemed a bit pleased.

Then her lips curled malevolently as she threw Hal a slight glance.

"Brat, an unwelcome guest might be showing up at your doorstep soon. When the time comes, your caliber shall be tested... It is fine for you to chase after mysteries, but do not lower your guard in any event."

Confronted with this sudden warning, Hal frowned.

While Hal and company were in Tokyo New Town, listening to news of the incoming Raptors...

Platinum-colored flames were burning on a small Pacific island.

The location was in the waters near the Ogasawara Islands, at an unpopulated island where seagulls were the only creatures one could call residents. Scorching and mysterious, platinum flames were burning on this rock-covered remote island.

These were supernatural flames produced by the magic of dragons.

And they were identical to the flames that Raak Al Soth had created in the past.

This time, the flames were burning Pavel Galad, an elite dragon with metallic silver scales.

Roughly two weeks prior, he had been defeated by the dragon king known as "Princess Yukikaze."

However, the massive hole in his chest had already healed while his almost destroyed heartmetal was gradually recovering normal functionality.

The reason for his revival was held in the center of Pavel Galad's palm. Engraved upon the dragon's right palm was a runic symbol consisting of three Vs.

This was precisely the power of dragonbane that Galad had inherited—The Rune of the Sword.

"My body's total recovery is imminent. Soon enough, I will complete preparations for battle... Before that comes to pass, my minions, fly over to that land on my behalf to blow the horns of war declaration. Let the citizens of the land, rightfully mine, Pavel Galad's, to conquer, bear witness to my burning spirit."

An elongated series of islands lay further west in the ocean. He was sending his minions there.

While issuing commands to them, Galad's body continued to burn with platinum-colored flames. This was a trial imposed upon him as the price for obtaining the Rune of the Sword.

"To conquer that land and claim it as my territory—That is precisely the trial bestowed upon me!"

The silver dragon, Pavel Galad, had acquired the power of dragonbane.

Unbeknownst to Hal and company, his invasion was going to change the future dramatically —

Chapter 2 - Shadow of the Uninvited Visitor

Part 1

"But aren't the dragons flying from the Pacific Ocean towards the Miura Peninsula — approaching Kanagawa!? Is it really okay to land here!?"

Juujouji Orihime had to yell as hard as she could over the noise of the propeller blades.

The white helicopter transporting Orihime and Asya had just landed.

This was the Witch Mansion's former site at Shin-Kiba's redevelopment zone. The earlier battle had turned parts of the area into scorched earth.

"Even if we head straight to the scene, *we* are not going to make it in time!"

Asya opened the landed helicopter's cabin door fiercely while explaining.

After parting ways with Hal and Hazumi, the two of them had gone to a nearby elementary school. In order to rush to the scene in the shortest time possible, this helicopter had come specifically to "pick them up." Using the school yard as an impromptu helipad, the helicopter took off as soon as the two girls boarded —

However, inside the cabin, Asya requested a change of destination, hence, in the end, they landed here in Shin-Kiba.

"By the time we get there, it's likely the SDF and the TPDO's intercepting forces will have started engaging the Raptors in battle."

Asya walked briskly towards the seashore while declaring simply.

"It would be a pointless waste of military budget and human resources if they have to mobilize with us on the scene."

"But you just said we won't make it in time."

"Let me use this excellent opportunity to tell you about the most effective solution. I want you to use the magic I taught you recently and apply it in actual combat."

"Y-You want me to use *that*!?"

Following behind Asya, Orihime panicked. She had basic understanding on how to use magic and previous successes when testing things out, but whether she had confidence or not—

"Here's a question, just in case. Can I say that I am not confident?"

"Sure, but even without confidence in yourself, you must still present me with success."

"Understood. I guess this is the sink or swim approach. I never thought you'd turn out to be a coach from hell, Asya-san."

"It's all thanks to you being an obedient pupil, Orihime-san. Very good."

The two of them arrived at the seashore that had breakwaters for coastal defense.

Along the way, police officers in tactical unit uniforms could be seen from time to time. Reportedly, they belonged to the Metropolitan Police Department's urban rescue team. They seemed to be monitoring the cordoned area around the Mansion.

"I thought it was the SDF's job to assist witches?"

"It seems that witch support in Japanese urban areas is under police jurisdiction. My impression is that the military—no, the SDF—is more in charge of patrolling, fighting on the frontlines when 'serpents' are not dispatched, as well as handling aftermaths."

"Hello."

A young man in a well-worn suit spoke to them.

He was Kenjou Genya, a member of SAURU's Tokyo New Town branch. Were it not for his sloppy appearance, most prominently an unkempt beard, he would more than likely be considered a handsome man.

"And to think I specially prepared a helicopter in order to transport you two as quickly as possible."

Kenjou remarked with a completely carefree expression.

"By choosing to disembark halfway, are you trying to have Juujouji-san do *that*? Isn't that asking too much from a newcomer whose career started less than a month ago?"

"There is no problem in ability. She is supposed to be able to accomplish it for sure."

"I see. In other words, she has excellent talent that has been approved by Miss Asya, the seasoned veteran."

Asya answered without any change in expression. Only then did Kenjou nod.

They did not seem too worried about Juujouji Orihime's power. Feeling pressure from this, Orihime looked out across Tokyo Bay, which was extending before her eyes.

The Edomae Sea, a vast stretch of saltwater connecting to the Pacific Ocean afar.

Then there was the Miura shore where Raptors in flight were approaching—

"Well then, Orihime-san, please begin the Astral Link."

Asya spoke the name of the expected magic.

"Even when separated from your 'serpent' partner, both sides can still share senses as long as you maintain a link between each other's spiritual being. You can issue commands from over here and even receive what the 'serpent' sees and hears in real time."

"Meaning I can fight by sending just the 'serpent' into the distance, right...?"

Orihime pondered Asya's goal in teaching this technique earlier.

"Yes. Of course, there are weaknesses. A 'serpent' is unable to invoke pseudo-divinity without her witch nearby. However, long-distance combat is sufficient if the enemies are only Raptors."

"But that's only if I succeed in the magic..."

Orihime had heard that the SDF at the Yokosuka base would need to deploy their air force if she failed.

Orihime took a deep breath and braced herself.

"Most crucial of all is the subtle timing of whether you can arrive at the scene in concert with the enemy. Since you are not familiar yet, Orihime-san, that's why we came to the seaside where there are fewer obstructions to visibility."

"S-So things like that have an effect too."

"Yes. However, there are lazybones among master-class witches who can annihilate twenty Raptors while lying in bed at home, so ultimately, it's just a question of familiarity."

"That would be a bit too lazy..."

After criticizing senior witches whom she had never met, Orihime said candidly:

"Remember last time when you gave me a magic textbook for novices? Sorry, but to be honest, I can't understand it at all..."

The book was filled with circuitous and incomprehensible descriptions lacking in specifics.

"That's fine," Asya said in response to Orihime bringing up the matter.

"Ultimately, the world never deviates from the Bruce Lee principle."

"That one, right? Don't think, feel..."

Orihime embraced the teachings of the great martial artist and action movie star then began to imagine.

First, it was Akuro-Ou's figure. Then she imagined countless strands linking herself to the white fox-wolf—

The important factors were concentration, vividness of imagination, and unshakable pride in your own psyche being the world's strongest soul. This was the secret trick that Asya had taught Orihime before.

(To be honest, I'm not confident I'll succeed without issue!)

However, this situation with "failure not an option" was pushing her from behind.

Orihime conjured a mental image in her own distinctive style then opened her eyes wide. Finally, she pressed her left hand into her voluptuous bosom and focused her awareness on her heart.

A witch's heart—That was precisely the mysterious fountain that generated magical power.

"Akuro-Ou, come forth immediately to fight along my side!"

At the same time, Orihime released her voice and magical power towards the sky.

A pentagram of light manifested in the air then transformed into an infinity sign to materialize Akuro-Ou's body concretely. Then Orihime and her partner's souls were linked as imagined—

"Akuro-Ou!"

The instant she shouted, Orihime's consciousness was drawn out of her body, pulled by Akuro-Ou's spiritual body.

Thus, Orihime's consciousness flew into the sky, arriving "above" Akuro-Ou's position, resulting in a so-called "out-of-body" experience to watch over Akuro-Ou from the air.

"Switching works..."

When she tried to open her eyes, her consciousness instantly returned to her own body. Standing firmly on the reclaimed land, Orihime saw the image of Tokyo Bay extending before her eyes...

She closed her eyes again. Hence, her consciousness "separated" again and flew to the position *above* Akuro-Ou.

"Orihime-san, please have Akuro-Ou follow Rushalka!"

The instant she heard Asya's voice, the blue wyvern had already flown to Akuro-Ou's side.

The wyvern-shaped leviathan with a lone horn like a unicorn's. While Orihime was concentrating, Asya had summoned Rushalka without her noticing.

"Just follow her, Akuro-Ou. Do as Asya-san said!"

"Rushalka, continue moving towards the airspace I indicated!"

In response to her covenantee's calls, the blue wyvern started to fly away from the land.

Flying in a straight line, she was exceptionally fast. Akuro-Ou chased her desperately, barely keeping up. Pulled by the link to her partner's spiritual body, Orihime's consciousness automatically flew in pursuit.

Looking to the side, she saw that Asya's image had also shown up by the time she noticed.

Apparently, another person's "out-of-body" consciousness could be seen using magical sight.

"If it's simply flying in a straight line, a 'serpent' can even reach two-thirds the speed of sound," said Asya's consciousness.

She, too, was flying at an astounding speed.

"Let's head over to the interception point directly like this."

"But Asya-san, I'm surprised you know which direction to fly!"

"That's because I'm using Spatial Perception and Location Information magic. Like Enemy Search, they are essential spells for long-distance combat. I'll teach them carefully to you later."

It looked like there was a mountain of things to learn in order to become a veteran witch.

Orihime sighed and had Akuro-Ou fly at full speed in this manner for a while. Involuntarily, her consciousness was pulled along.

After a duration enough to enjoy the pleasure of jogging...

The two leviathans kept flying over the sea during this time, but before long, steel-colored lesser dragons finally appeared up ahead. As though looking for where to attack, they were staring at the land's surface.

Lesser dragons, Raptors—A total of nine as reported earlier.

After seeing elites up close, Orihime found that Raptors felt more like lizards in comparison.

"I'll use Akuro-Ou to intercept them as discussed earlier. Rushalka should take a break!" Orihime said immediately after confirming the enemy.

Although not as severe as Minadzuki's case, Rushalka was not in peak condition either. Unless necessary, she should not be forced to enter the fray.

"Yes, I'm counting on you. This type of enemy should be easily handled as long as you don't get careless!"

Orihime nodded to acknowledge Asya's advice then transmitted thoughts to attack.

After flying behind Rushalka the whole time, Akuro-Ou changed direction and made a beeline for the nine Raptors at full speed.

Charging fiercely into the group of Raptors in this manner, she attacked simply with a body collision.

Raptors were less than half the size of "serpents" in physique. This impact alone was enough to send three Raptors flying like puppies in a car collision. Substantial damage was likely inflicted.

—In a way, this preemptive strike had decided the outcome of the battle.

A group of lizards thrown into disarray by the attack versus Akuro-Ou who had started the battle with unstoppable momentum from the beginning. With an overwhelming difference in power level on the outset, the ensuing battle was completely one-sided.

So-called horn counterparts were organs used by "serpents" for attack and intimidation.

Akuro-Ou's nine tails, thick and long, served as her horn counterpart. Twisting like lively serpents, they reached out to the enemy Raptors.

Stretching like rubber and bending, they struck the Raptors brutally like whips.

The nine tails repeated such attacks again and again. Unable to dodge or block after getting struck by the tails, the winged lizards were blown away.

Dying in basically two or three hits, the Raptors crashed into the sea one after another.

By the time Akuro-Ou discharged a heat beam through her breath to kill the final Raptor, Orihime and Asya were certain of victory.

The two witches released the materialization of their "serpents," allowing them to disappear from the world.

At the same time, the Astral Links lost effect. Orihime opened her tight shut eyes.

In the distance was Tokyo Bay's sea surface. Nearby was Shin-Kiba's reclaimed land. After confirming Asya, Kenjou and the helicopter with her own eyes, Orihime exhaled.

"Finally winning the battle, now I can relax... Uh, isn't this weird?"

Her knees suddenly lost strength and she collapsed to the ground.

Her body was so exhausted that it felt like mud. Realizing her condition, Orihime jumped in surprise.

"The farther we are from our 'serpents,' the greater the consumption. Reactions to our commands also become delayed. These are the drawbacks to long-distance combat, so please take note. I haven't done this for a long time and now I'm hungry..."

Asya seemed tired too, but she did not collapse to the ground.

What affected the level of fatigue was probably one's power as a witch rather than physical stamina.

Regardless, even though she had received full support from Asya, her senior, Orihime still managed to endure an entire battle on her own.

"Judging from the situation, the battle seems to have finished."

"Indeed... You are right. Nee-sama and Asya-san seem to be safe and sound. I am relieved."

After Hal remarked quietly, Hazumi breathed a sigh of relief next to him.

In the distance, Orihime could be seen sitting collapsed on the ground while Asya's countenance showed utter exhaustion. However, neither of them looked like they were cornered. In their surroundings, Kenjou and two helicopter pilots were starting preparations to withdraw.

"I'm glad I brought this over. That girl Asya is most likely complaining about being hungry again. Juujouji looks very tired too."

Hal was carrying a tote bag that belonged to Asya.

Inside it was the Chinese packed lunch. Bringing it along, Hal and Hazumi had taken a taxi to Shin-Kiba.

"Oh, that I can understand. Whenever I make Minadzuki do new things, I feel very exhausted too. Sometimes I even need an intravenous drip—"

"Drip...?"

Hal muttered in puzzlement in response to Hazumi's answer.

Indeed, summoning and controlling "serpents" took a heavy toll on the bodies and minds of witches.

But normally speaking, combat against Raptors should not go as far as to require IV drips. Speaking of which, Orihime mentioned before that her cousin had poor health...

It looked like Shirasaka Hazumi was a girl unsuited to heavy work after all. Hal sighed.

"W-What's wrong, Haruga-san?"

"No, it's nothing."

Hal finally began to discover the true nature of his fearful mindset towards Orihime and this docile girl with frail health.

It was guilt. As a member of SAURU, Hal had started helping witches establish covenants with "serpents" since long ago. However, not all of the girls chosen as candidates were outstandingly talented like Asya,

who would develop into master-class witches to take the stage with vitality and magnificence.

Instead, girls unsuited to this job were more common —

Hence, Hal's guilt would involuntarily surge whenever he stayed by Hazumi or Orihime's side.

"So you two came too."

Hal interrupted his thoughts. Hiiragi Yukari was walking over to them.

She was dressed in a very soft looking woolen sweater with a skirt, still exceedingly feminine in attire.

"Looks like there's no need to dispatch Orihime-san and others."

Hiiragi-san raised the cellphone in her hand lightly and said.

"The situation with Raptors appearing at various islands across the country has essentially been confirmed. There are a total of six groups of lesser dragons attacking at the same time, flying towards the following locations respectively: Cape Nosappu at Hokkaido's Nemuro Peninsula, Hachinobe at Aomori Prefecture, near the largest of the Izu Islands, Omaezaki at Shizuoka Prefecture, Tosa Bay at Kochi Prefecture, as well as Nichinan at Miyazaki Prefecture..."

Hiiragi-san's cellphone was displaying a map of Japan.

There were eight spots flashing red, all locations that Hiiragi-san had mentioned.

"All of them are on the Pacific side..."

"Then I sent 'serpents' to five locations and defeated the Raptors at the coasts. The only exception was Miyazaki but the people at the JASDF figured a way to handle it before the attack reached full-tilt."

Excluding Hazumi and Asya, there were currently seven witches in Japan.

Tokyo New Town in the Kantou region had Orihime. Apart from that, Hokkaido, Iwate, Gifu, Wakayama, Shimane, Kagawa has one witch each. Although the situation developed to the point that a majority of them had to be mobilized to intercept the dragons, in the end, there were no major repercussions apparently.

"Still, Orihime-san is doing so well that she doesn't seem like someone who had just become a witch."

Hiiragi-san suddenly changed the subject.

"This is off the record. Frankly speaking, I originally thought that her magical power would be limited even if she entered a covenant with a 'serpent.' I never expected to guess wrongly."

"I-I see."

Confronted with sudden frankness, Hazumi did not know how to react.

Hal had held the same opinion previously. He did not know if it was due to Hinokagutsuchi's involvement, but Orihime was exhibiting extraordinarily premature development of her powers. It was only natural for this to raise suspicions.

However, since Hiiragi-san was currently observing Hal's reaction, he could not say this aloud...

As a coworker familiar with her fraudulent personality, Hal tried his best to answer with feigned helplessness:

"Well, there are times when astoundingly rare talent pops up suddenly in the world."

"That may be true, but Orihime-san shows none of the *stubborn personality* commonly found in girls of this sort, which is why it's so surprising."

"That makes Juujouji weird enough already, almost on the same level as Asya."

"That's one way of looking at it... I never thought of that. Maybe I should admit defeat."

"U-Umm, I feel that the comment just now was quite rude to Nee-sama and Asya-san..."

Hazumi politely advised her elders, causing Hiiragi-san to smile wryly.

"Sorry, I might have gone too far... Oh right. There's more work for Orihime-san."

"Ah, it must be *that*."

Hazumi apparently guessed it.

"Yes, *that*."

Hiiragi-san nodded and replied.

"Although it's very troublesome and unnecessary, it is part of her job. So, Haruomi-kun, I am leaving Hazumi-san in your hands. I still have to take Orihime-san to take care of some regular business."

Hiiragi-san took her leave. In front of them was the exhausted Orihime and the slightly recovered Asya. Hal's silver-haired childhood friend was approaching Kenjou, apparently asking for food. Bursting in laughter, Kenjou handed her a piece of chocolate...

Part 2

"Yesterday was such a trying experience..." Orihime remarked in utter exhaustion the next day after her first long-distance battle.

Since today was a normal weekday sandwiched between consecutive holidays, everyone was at school. It was currently lunch time. After finishing lunch in the cafeteria, Hal, Asya and Orihime had gone to a corner in the school next to a flowerbed looked after by the Gardening Club.

"I'm totally fine with putting effort into the likes of fighting and magic. After all, that's what I originally envisioned as part of becoming a witch. But..."

Today, Orihime's face was showing fatigue that any bystander could see.

"I was never told that I had to visit sponsors to report my victories..."

"Nee-sama, it's thanks to those elderly men that Minadzuki and your Akuro-Ou can take action freely. We've got to thank them properly."

Smiling wryly, Hazumi corrected her cousin.

Studying in the third year of the middle school section, she had been brought here by Orihime as well.

"I'm sure you could create an amicable atmosphere by smiling like an angel while calling out 'Grampsy♪' even when faced with what seems like an army of old men with weird tempers. But for a newcomer like me, it's still quite a heavy burden..."

"Ah, so what Hiiragi-san meant by 'regular business' was going over to greet sponsors."

Hal understood. The sponsors funding Hazumi and Orihime's activities were businesses, capitalists, NGOs, religious leaders, local authorities, etc stationed in Tokyo New Town and the Kantou region.

To show up at a gathering of representatives and engage in lengthy dialogue—

This was indeed a heavy burden for a girl who was still a middle schooler until recently.

Nevertheless, Orihime was bolder than average, after all. Hal felt that she would rapidly get used to these duties.

"Don't worry, Orihime-san. If you find it a pain, just put on diva-like airs and they'll actively avoid contact with you."

"Because, witches are irreplaceable human resources, their positions are ultimately much stronger."

"Start with kicking tables. Then order people to buy drinks, complain about the taste and pour the drinks over them."

"If anyone raises objections, just hint that you'll apply to be 'reassigned' somewhere else."

"Stop tempting a newcomer with such immoral suggestions!"

After listening to Asya and Hal's chattering advice, Orihime could not help but scold them.

"Good grief. Haruga-kun and Asya-san, seriously you two... But it's not like I am totally opposed to the devil's temptation."

"N-Nee-sama!"

"In truth, I am supposed to pay my respects at a grave after school today, but Grandfather and the others suddenly announced a dinner party to celebrate yesterday's victory or something. As a result, I have to attend as the guest of honor."

Orihime sighed and explained in response to her cousin's protest.

"Is it someone's death anniversary if you're paying respects at a grave?"

"No, it's basically more of a formality. I was going to tell my father, mother and younger brother that I've become able to fight dragons."

Orihime's attitude was the same as usual, without suppressing or adding extra emphasis in her voice.

"On a certain Sunday when I happened to be free from kendo competitions, we went out as a family. While our car was passing under a highway, we unfortunately encountered a collapse accident. I was told that a few years ago, Raptors had rampaged in the area, causing the road itself to deteriorate... Oh dear, even though dragons were not fully responsible, I was thinking I should still report to my family."

Hal was informed that Orihime's family consisted only of herself and the grandfather.

Naturally, there must have been a reason for that. Hal, too, had been living alone for a long time now. Native to Georgia, Asya had no family apart from her mother who lived in Istanbul. Although this was not the reason, Hal still tried asking:

"Hiiragi-san probably owes me a favor or two. Want me to talk to her?"

"If you count me in, then that's a debt of three favors, okay?"

"Thank you both, but it's fine. I will tell her myself if I really feel opposed to going, so don't worry about it. However... If by any chance I need you to do something like that in the future, I'll be counting on you then."

After replying to Hal and Asya in a joking manner, Orihime nodded at her cousin.

As soon as this subject was brought up, Hazumi had immediately gone over to Orihime's side to silently cuddle against her.

"Oh, that reminds me. I need to talk about something completely unrelated," said Orihime very suddenly.

Hal and Asya shared a common aversion to depressing topics of conversation. Orihime apparently was the same.

"Actually, I thought about it after the battle ended yesterday. Haruga-san had Rushalka use the Rune of the Bow last time, right?"

"Oh, you mean that thing."

"Wouldn't it be very handy if Akuro-Ou could make use of that rune too?"

"Well, that's definitely true."

Hal agreed with Orihime so he nodded. But unbelievably, somehow inexplicably, Hal had a feeling that things would not go so smoothly. Why?

"Indeed, Rushalka and Asya-san were really amazing last time."

"I know, right? If Minadzuki recovers, I would like her to try using it too."

"If you put it that way... I guess there's basically no problem."

The cousins nodded at each other and Hal expressed agreement. However.

"N-No! That's a bond belonging (exclusively) to me and Haruomi (grumble grumble)..."

For some unknown reason, Asya was the only one objecting. Although there were some mumbled parts that he could not quite catch, Orihime seemed to get the idea, showing an expression that read 'Speaking of which... oh no.'

Speculating what his childhood friend was saying between the lines, Hal then spoke:

"I understand Asya's feelings in wanting to proceed with caution. After all, this power's origins are unknown so relying on it excessively will definitely be dangerous. Or perhaps side effects caused by the rune might appear."

"Uwah. As expected, Haruga-san's line of thought went in that direction..."

"What are you referring to? Whatever, let's put this aside for now. Although there's a risk, I definitely want to find more opportunities to test it out in order to gather more information..."

After muttering that, Hal stared at Orihime intently.

The arrival of a collaborator possessing a "serpent" in excellent condition had stimulated his ulterior motives.

"Now that you've suggested it, let's go test it out."

"H-Haruomi!"

"It's fine even if it doesn't work out. Let's see, how did it go last time?"

Ignoring Asya's protests, Hal began to search his memories.

If memory served him correctly, last time he had apparently thought to himself that he *needed* Asya and Rushalka no matter what, then extended his hand. In turn, his childhood friend had held his hand—

"Juujouji, hold my hand."

Hal extended his right hand.

Orihime nodded vigorously and slowly held Hal's hand.

The hand where a rune of Ruruk Soun resided, the location of the mysterious magic symbol—Then Hal thought intensely to himself that he needed Juujouji Orihime no matter what.

This continued for almost a minute. Hal quietly said:

"Seems like it's not working. I guess it looks like I can't entrust that rune to Juujouji."

Why was it not working? Hal began to contemplate.

Then when it was after school, Orihime departed in a hurry to attend that dinner party something or other.

Declaring "I've got something to do!", Asya stepped out of the classroom. As for Hal, instead of going home alone, he walked to a location in front of two concrete school buildings, namely, the library and the cultural clubs building.

Furthermore, he had brought Orihime's cousin, Hazumi, with him.

"But is this okay? Leaving a witch's equipment and books in school..."

"Although it's not ideal, it's still better than other random places," Hal answered Hazumi's worried whispers.

"Our school was built with funding from SAURU and was founded at the same time as another university in New Town. Both schools were apparently founded to serve a certain goal, reportedly to provide magic education to commoners..."

"Teaching magic to ordinary people!?"

"Of course that doesn't mean anyone either. If students with excellent aptitude and a love of learning appeared, SAURU would apparently recruit them for an elite education while they were young."

Why would a secret organization devoted to researching magic run schools?

Curious about this question, Hal had tried investigating. Similar schools seemed to exist all over the world.

"Becoming a witch depends purely on inborn aptitude, but working in research is different. This is perhaps a way of gathering talented people of this sort, which is why the school was designed to prevent the dangers and secrets of magic from leaking out. At the same time, it is also inside Juujouji and your circles."

Even relocating the Witch Mansion here as a temporary substitute facility would be no problem at all.

"I heard that the underground spaces here were built in consideration of such situations."

Hal began to examine the library anew. Just before he was about to leave the campus, Hiiragi-san had called him. She wanted Hal to check out the venue for the new Mansion.

Along the way, Hal happened to run into Hazumi. Then unintentionally, he revealed what had happened.

However, Hal did not expect Hazumi to make the following request politely:

"May... I come along with you? Please allow me to help out."

Was she quite concerned about the fact that she could not contribute on the battlefield despite being a witch?

Despite coming up with many excuses to reject her, in the end, Hal decided he might as well agree to let her accompany him—

Hal brought Hazumi to the first floor underground.

There was a door at the end of the hallway. He inserted the key that a member of school staff privy to SAURU-related matters had given him. After opening the door, he found a flight of stairs behind it.

Proceeding from this point, the second to sixth floors underground were to become the temporary Mansion.

Hal and Hazumi walked through each floor together.

Every room was empty. They checked whether the air conditioning, locks and lights were functioning normally. There were no problems with any of them.

"Looks like it's safe to move the materials at the previous Mansion over here. It's time to withdraw, I guess."

After the checking was complete, Hal told his impromptu partner.

"Fortunately, the checking task was relatively simple. If things always turn out like this, life would be much easier."

"Oh, I've heard. Your job involves traveling all over the world to unearth magic-infused mystical artifacts and magic textbooks... Isn't that right?"

"That's basically correct. But there are various other matters to handle too."

"Various matters, I see... For example?"

"Well, such as infiltrating concession territories in various lands for internal investigations or the like."

"So you even do that sort of thing."

"There are also ecological studies on dragons as living organisms. Like observing packs of Raptors from close range."

"That is truly dangerous..."

"Speaking of the most dangerous missions, that would probably be investigating the trail and whereabouts of elite dragons that had come to earth. Although I experienced it once with Soth last time, there's nothing worse than having those things target you."

"That's for certain. Please be careful!"

Hal felt intrigued. For a listener, Hazumi seemed too enthusiastic...

"You're interested in this kind of stuff?"

"Oh yes. I love listening to travel stories. Also, although not too many girls share the same interests, I also love adventure and exploration anecdotes."

"By adventure, do you mean conquering the tallest peaks on every continent or taking a sailboat across the Pacific?"

"Yes. Stuff like cycling across the European continent is also my favorite."

Hazumi smiled with a chuckle then added shyly:

"But I'm sure it's beyond me, that's all... Also, I have no choice but to stay in Tokyo, so in fact, I've almost never left the Kantou region..."

"You're in charge of protecting these lands after all. It can't be helped."

Hazumi was the witch tasked specifically with guarding Tokyo New Town and the surrounding region.

Although she was rewarded with handsome monetary compensation and VIP treatment, a witch shouldering duties as a "protector" could not even leave her assigned region to travel on a whim.

A "mercenary" like Asya who fought in various places was actually quite rare.

"It's not like you're Juujouji. Why not take this chance while your 'serpent' is recuperating to go on a trip?"

"Fufufu, what a lovely idea. However, that won't work."

Revealing her highly transparent smile, Hazumi shook her head.

"Yes, Minadzuki is weak, but not to the point of being impossible to summon. A situation could come up where I might be able to help despite her current condition."

"That's so so conscientious of you. But... your judgment is most likely correct."

Hal scratched his head while agreeing. He felt kind of defeated against her.

"Although Juujouji and Akuro-Ou are so strong that they don't resemble newcomers, they're inexperienced after all. There's definitely the risk of 'unexpected' dangers."

"About what Nee-sama brought up earlier about her family, it occasionally gets me thinking. If only I could've become able to summon Minadzuki earlier, to eliminate all the dragons in the area back then, perhaps Nee-sama might still have a complete family—That's almost like dreaming, right?"

"....."

"I think this type of 'cautiousness' probably isn't futile. Fufu."

Seeing this girl, younger than him, smile cheerfully, Hal thought to himself.

Although she was a bit reserved and less striking in appearance, this girl might actually be even more reliable than himself or Orihime.

She had persisted in fighting dragons over the years even though her magic was not particular strong.

Having experienced all kinds of hardship, many considerations must have crossed her mind. Hal felt himself revise his opinion of Hazumi a little.

Part 3

When Hal and Hazumi were underground beneath the library, Asya was actually nearby too.

She was inside the room of a cultural club on the third floor of the adjacent cultural clubs building. At this moment, she was dressed in neither the school uniform nor a tracksuit.

Instead — she was wearing an apron dress.

In other words, what one would call a monochrome maid outfit. However, it was not the standard style.

The skirt was exceedingly short. Additionally, the stockings underneath were even attached to a garter belt.

Someone knocked on the clubroom's door. After Asya answered "please enter," the peerless eccentric, President M walked in.

"You have already changed. Well done."

"But why must I wear this kind of outfit?"

"Because it is the attire most suited to today's special lecture. Are you ready?"

"Of course, President."

Inside the clubroom that was dim from the drawn curtains, Asya and President M stood face to face.

The president was not in school uniform today either. She was still dressed in that black female garment resembling a maternity dress. The gravitas stemming from both her personality and physique made her seem like some kind of bar matron.

"Bluntly stated, the theme of today's lecture is the 'cafe'!"

"Dare I ask the purpose!?"

"A venue for couples on dates where they can lean in mutually and whisper sweet nothings to each other. 'Did you wait for long?' 'No, I just arrived.' A venue frequently used no matter how shallow or deep the relationship, that is the cafe. Unless you overcome this, you won't become a girl with a romance standard score above 70! Let the lesson begin!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Asya could not help but salute in response to President M's command.

During her training in the Russian army, an instructor known as "Volk," featuring intimidating upturned eyes, had subjected her to a special course in unarmed combat arts. Her memories of that time were completely reawakened.

However, President M sighed and said:

"Hold on."

"What's the problem?"

"Lots of problems. What's with that salute?"

"Did I do something wrong? Since this is Japan, considering local customs, I translated the Russian into English on the top of my head. I thought my pronunciation was spot on?"

"It's irrelevant whether that was Russian or English. That's precisely why people secretly call you stuff like 'the female mercenary of steel who returned from the battlefield' or 'bandit-style female hunter.'"

"WHAAAT!? I spent no more than six months in the army!"

Asya objected in full force.

"That's baseless slander since I only accepted occasional jobs to provide assistance after that. Besides, I've never participated in any bandit-like guerrilla activities."

"So you have real experience in the army..."

"I wouldn't call it experience, just a hobby at most."

While the president was showing an impressed look, Asya said:

"If I do say so myself, I believe I've perfectly hidden my slightly special experiences, fully integrating myself into life in a Japanese school."

"Nonsense. Indeed, you have adjusted very well, but those experiences are completely impossible to hide."

"Eh!?"

"Never mind, let us shelf that issue for now and cut to the chase."

As though focusing her mind, President M cleared her voice and said:

"Today's theme is the cafe. Now the lesson shall begin in earnest!"

"I'm all ears!"

"Here is a question for you. What is your opinion of girls who order a sandwich and cake at a cafe but exclaim 'oh no~ That's too much for me to finish~'?"

"That's so annoying. If you order something, you should finish it all without leaving any scraps behind," Asya answered without a moment's hesitation.

"The iron rule of hunting is to only catch as much as you can eat. At least be smart enough to process unfinished food into nonperishable rations."

"Excellent, minus twenty points to feminine charm!"

"—!?"

"Personally, I share the same opinion on not wasting food. However, you just missed out on an excellent opportunity for intimate contact!"

"Intimate contact...?"

"Oh no~ That's too much for me to finish~~ Help me out here. Say ah and open your mouth~~ How's that, does it taste good?' I'm talking about this!"

Asya was stunned after watching President M's solo performance, accompanied by exaggerated gestures.

"S-Such a high-level technique... By doing that, wouldn't it naturally reenact a scene of 'couples pressing their faces together, leaning against one another, lovingly sharing the same plate of food'...?"

"Indeed. You are quick on the uptake. Excellent."

"B-But using this card means offering the food in front of you as a sacrifice... I-I'm capable of eating tons of dessert and cake is my favorite. I can even eat one whole cake at times."

"For the sake of achieving the strategic goal, isn't this where you should be applying restraint?"

"Urghhhhhh..."

Ordering a chiffon cake specially for herself then sharing half of it with someone...

Imagining such a scene, Asya took a devastating blow and collapsed in depression on the clubroom's floor. With eyes like a strict teacher's, President M looked down at Asya's current state and said to her:

"Looks like you have encountered another stumbling block. Teaching you how to overcome this obstacle is exceedingly easy... But that won't help you grow."

"President!"

"Go on and agonize as much as you can. Ponder thoroughly. The answer you reach in the end shall determine whether your feminine charm rises or falls."

"Falling is not an option!"

"Indeed. By that time, you will go through a job change from a 'girl with low feminine charm' to a veritable 'girl who has abandoned love despite her youth.' You must take care."

"Ooh. So there's no chance for growth unless I take a bit of risk..."

"Yes, that's the spirit. However... You are not sexy at all."

Looking downwards at Asya who was sitting helplessly on the floor.

Her miniskirt was a mess, almost exposing the view beneath. Wrapped tightly in stockings, her legs were laid out on the floor. Her posture looked a bit indecent.

Furthermore, she was bearing a tearful countenance coupled with a maid outfit.

Gazing at Asya, President M's eyes showed pity.

"Normally speaking, any boy in middle school or older would feel his heart racing at the sight of someone with your face and attire, displaying the current expression and posture. But right now, you are not erotic in the slightest. There is no charm to speak of."

"Not erotic in the slightest!?"

Asya was crushed by shock again.

"D-Don't judge me by appearance. I'm actually a very generous girl. Although boys in the surroundings are thinking about weird stuff, I deliberately pretend not to notice in consideration of the taxes they pay towards the adorable me!"

"You probably lack awareness towards scrutiny."

President M crossed her arms and began to ponder deeply.

"You are still very mediocre despite dressing up as a maid. You can't even say things such as 'Look at my getup☆' or 'So embarrassing, quit staring!'"

"After all, it's my personal philosophy to act my natural self at all times."

"Isn't that the problem? Try imagining for a second. Rather than me, the one currently observing you is that Haruga with his wizened eyes."

"H-Haruomi?"

"You need to present yourself to him differently from before."

"How specifically?"

"I screwed up slightly, so embarrassing... Please don't look. Oh no. I'm going red...' Roughly something like that. Apart from that—Oh right, you have to nonchalantly maintain your posture to offer vague glimpses under your skirt. It'd be even better if you could show a 'teasing' expression as appropriate."

"A-Aren't these demands too severe!?"

"Quit complaining and just do it! At this rate, that blockhead will get snatched away by other girls, you know!?"

Asya desperately mustered her passion after suffering this harsh reprimand.

She imagined Haruomi looking at her, thereby increasing her sense of shame.

Speaking of which, the length of this outfit's skirt was definitely too short—She originally did not pay much attention to such matters, but now she started worrying whether the underside of her skirt was visible. Her face finally began to heat up...

Suddenly aware of her indecent posture, Asya forcefully curled up.

"Excellent, that's exactly it. You are showing femininity in your airs and movements!"

"Really!?"

"Yes. Since you happen to be sitting, try doing the cougar pose. Even with a lack of breasts, you still have to emphasize them strongly so as to increase your sexiness!"

"I-I don't lack breasts, okay!? See, there's cleavage if I squeeze like this...!"

"I like this perseverance of yours in taking on challenges..."

Although this was the room of the Literature Club—

Asya and President M were immersed in activities completely unrelated to literature. Moreover, it was the club president who had made such suggestions herself, after all.

"Next, practice your movements while paying attention to other people's gazes. I will be watching from the side, so go and prepare a cup of tea."

"But the black tea and coffee supplies are out."

"Fine, I'll go buy some. In the meantime, practice on your own."

"W-What should I do on my own?"

"Relax, I've prepared a *script* for you. It might be a good idea if you went to work at a real maid cafe to get some practice under male gaze in a few days..."

"Sob."

After accomplishing the task of checking the underground levels of the library, Hal and Hazumi returned to the ground floor.

"U-Umm, if it is convenient, may I chat with you again next time? Actually... There are some matters I would like to discuss with you, Haruga-san."

"Chat with me? I don't think I can help much but sure, as long as you don't mind."

While talking, they exited the library.

At this moment, an acquaintance entered the adjacent cultural clubs building. It was President M, the eccentric whose mass was speculated to be 140kg. She was holding a convenience store bag in her hand.

"Oh my, you came today?"

"To take care of sundry chores, but I'm about to leave. I also have someone with me."

Hal glanced at Hazumi while he spoke.

The girl in his company bowed dutifully, not at all flustered. Even confronted with the clearly suspicious President M, she presented her highly transparent smile as usual.

Perhaps her tolerance for eccentrics was very high—

Hal could not help but feel impressed. Meanwhile, President M said:

"Delay your departure by half an hour and come with me for a visit to the Literature Club. Your friend is there too."

"You mean Asya?"

Hal muttered while looking at Hazumi beside him.

"If it is convenient... May I come along? I wish to learn about the building next door. I'm also interested in the high school division's club activities..."

Hearing her ask timidly, Hal nodded. It was definitely the right choice to scout out the place that was going to be the next Mansion.

Hence, the three of them ascended the stairs in the order of President M, Hal then Hazumi.

The president's physique was massive yet her footsteps were light and fast. Following in the rear, Hazumi said:

"Actually, I've always wanted to try joining a cultural club since long ago. After all, I am not good at sports. But the notion always remained as just a thought because I don't have much free time..."

"My club is perfect for your case."

"But I would feel bad if I miss activities often."

"Don't worry. Whether ghost members, part-time members who only show up once a month, or even members like Haruga here, I will shower them with love equally!"

Hazumi was obedient in nature while President M was powerful, but the rhythm of conversation was surprisingly fluid.

Just as Hal witnessed the birth of an unexpected combo, the trio reached the Literature Club's door. The instant the president opened the door...

"W-Welcome back, master and mistress. Umm, a warm welcome to you all today. I shall prepare tea immediately, so please wait a moment—"

Hal looked at his childhood friend who was cosplaying as a maid.

Not only that, she was also performing the motions of brewing black tea. However, there was no tea ware of any sort in her hands. Was she practicing a skit? Or was she playing a maid cafe game?

"...Huh? Haruomi, why are you here? And even Hazumi-san as well!?"

"I brought them along because I happened to run into them. I wanted to have you serve them tea."

"Kyahhhhhh!"

After hearing the president's explanation, Asya screamed.

In any case, Hal and company were invited into the Literature Club, taking their seats around the long table.

"Asya, can I ask what's the meaning of your cosplay and solo performance just now?"

"I-I invoke my right to silence and decline further questioning. If anything... Right, it's that. This is a training uniform!"

"...What are you training?"

"This question is banned. Putting that aside, please take a good look at my glamorous appearance!"

"Oh, it really suits you. Fufu, I really admire you, Asya-san, for looking so good in this type of outfit. It's marvelous."



"Hazumi-san, you are such a good girl!"

"By the way, Haruga, seeing as you brought a new girl, could it be that you've reached a phase of popularity?"

Just as everyone was savoring the black tea prepared by Asya, the president suddenly asked. At the same time, she stared tactlessly straight at Shirasaka Hazumi and Haruga Haruomi.

"Shirasaka is simply accompanying me. This has nothing to do with my luck in romance."

"Is that so? Though that may be the case currently, the future could be different."

President M spoke quietly then slowly nodded.

"Taking advantage of this excellent opportunity, I shall use my Feeling Love skill to predict your luck in romance."

"S-Skill?"

"Stay still. Hah!"

Under the gaze of the president's round eyes, Hal felt uneasy.

This lasted ten-odd seconds before the president quietly cocked her head.

"How odd, I cannot read your romance situation at all."

"Of course something like that can't be read."

"Nay. A massive and burdensome destiny is gradually devouring you, causing something as insignificant as luck in romance to be swept away to who knows where... That is how I see it."

Hal could not speak. He was extremely surprised.

Asya and Hazumi also stared in wide-eyed astonishment at President M. It was as though she knew about the Rune of the Bow.

In that instant, for the first time, Hal was awed by how unfathomable this person was.

Part 4

An icy plain of white as far as the eye could see—

However, the season was spring rather than winter in this land.

Princess Yukikaze's location was at the most northwestern point of the North American continent, at North Slope in Alaska.

A tundra zone next to the Arctic Ocean. Even though it was spring, the snow was melting rather late this year. Currently, the land was still covered in ice. However, this chilly air was quite ideal for Princess Yukikaze.

Well, a mild climate would not be bad either.

However, the sense of fulfillment could not compare to standing inside a vortex of extreme heat and cold.

A land of extremes where ordinary people had difficulty inhabiting. Standing there sternly to present a conqueror's majesty, she admired the view of raging wind, the sun and dark clouds—

This moment was when Princess Yukikaze's enjoyment peaked.

Currently, she was still maintaining her human appearance that was as beautiful as a snow fairy. A smile was displayed on the corners of her lips while clad in a white one-piece dress, she regarded the icy plain's silent beauty with affection.

After a while, she turned her gaze towards the man who was tainting this land of pure white like a blot of black ink.

Watching over her silently from behind, the man waited for her to speak first.

"I've been having trouble remembering lately... What is your name again?"

"O Lord, please call me Sophocles."

The man was dressed in a black suit with only a flimsy gray coat draped over it.

He was definitely too lightly dressed for this plain of ice. However, that refined voice of his remained steady without any hint of suffering from the cold.

"Ah yes, indeed. I heard you mention it a long time ago, but I forgot. By the way—"

"Are you inquiring about the silver dragon who had inherited the Sword?"

"Indeed. The island nation that you wanted the silver dragon to annex— It's part of the Crimson Queen's former territories. So the Bow is there after all?"

"I am afraid so. I intend to head over to search later."

The man in black, Sophocles, spoke in a sincere tone.

"However, regardless of whether a seal of dragonslaying is present in those lands, the trial I demanded will not change. The 'wedge' driven into that island nation is about to mature. Sniffing out the signs, the Jabones and the Zizou are evidently circling around that area."

"Wedge... Ah, is that the one that the Lightning Emperor and King Hannibal drove into the ground together?"

Princess Yukikaze looked south across the plain of ice.

An upright triangular prism of pure black was towering in the distance. A super tall structure exceeding a thousand meters in height. A tower the humans called a Monolith.

This tundra region was a dragon concession established in Alaska.

"I never expected this sort of thing to be built during my absence from earth."

"I originally intended to find a dragon king to advise taking over those lands. But simply because I chanced upon that silver dragon, I entrusted the task to him."

"Hmph... To establish one's kingdom as a show of caliber, sallying forth in valor along the Road to Kingship."

Princess Yukikaze laughed lightly.

"Haha, the earth has become slightly interesting. With that, the issue becomes the Bow's controller who might be present in that nation. Like me, Yukikaze, he holds the one half of the bow and arrow pair..."

She crossed her arms while her beautiful face, pale as snow, grew pensive.

"If the one who stands as Yukikaze's peer turns out to be an incompetent buffoon, there is no helping it: He will need to be decapitated and taken care of before anything goes wrong. However..."

The girl's delicate body naturally heated up.

It was the burgeoning fighting spirit and curiosity responding to her, the white dragon king.

"If his caliber is sufficient to defeat the silver dragon, then I might be inclined to *rampage* across the earth again after so long. Sophocles, report the results to me afterwards!"

Then night finally fell.

The the SDF's air force and navy had respective bases on Miyaka Island of the Izu Islands.

Stationed here was also a large aircraft carrier fleet belonging to the Trans-Pacific Defense Organization along with patrol units, etc—

A shining giant beast broke past the defensive line woven by these military forces.

First, the magic of High-Speed Flight tore through the reconnaissance net. This was extraordinary magic allowing the gigantic body, ten-odd meters long, to break the sound barrier.

Shining with the luster of metallic silver, the dragon spread his supersonic wings, racing across the sky above the Pacific Ocean.

With his destination already decided, the trajectory was a straight line. While producing sonic booms, he charged forward with ferocity.

Naturally, the human side had guards in charge of interception.

Those were the SDF and TPDO's air force and interception fleet.

But having seen that the *enemy's* true identity was an elite dragon—scientific name: *Eques Draconis*—an officer silently shook his head.

This was because he knew that interception would be futile.

In fact, the flying silver dragon only took one combat action.

He simply kept roaring. However, a magic beast's roar carried overwhelming magical power, drowning out the noise from all artillery and engines to reverberate across the sky. Then the sound turned into a pulse, instantly sweeping across the entire airspace.

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

All humans present within this pulse had their hearts ruptured, instantly dying on the spot. Death arrived swiftly and assuredly, whether inside fighter jet cockpits, escort vessels, cruisers or aircraft carriers, no exceptions.

Then after an extremely brief period of time...

The elite dragon with metallic silver luster arrived over Yokohama.

Having shifted to supersonic flight suddenly, the dragon had not given 'serpent'-related personnel in the Kantou region any time or chance to react.

However, he did not do this for the purpose of avoiding conflict.

Instead, he was impatient for the imminent battle. He wanted to declare war as early as possible.

"I hereby decree to the humans of these lands. It is my wish that you record the entirety of my next words to pass onto your friends and neighbors. This announcement concerns your future greatly."

The words uttered by the silver dragon consisted of easily understood English.

Then his voice, filled with masculinity and sense of honor, resounded clearly across the night sky of the Yokohama metropolis.

The silver dragon scales glittered amidst light from the night scenery. Towering next to the dragon hovering motionlessly in the air was the symbol of Yokohama city, the Yokohama Landmark Tower.

"I shall bear the shame of admitting to my ignorance. Regarding these islands, the system governing your country and the political rulers in charge, I know very little. Perhaps even nothing at all."

Despite his true nature as a magic beast known as the dragon, he possessed a pleasant voice.

His voice, dignified and awe-inspiring, had the oratorical qualities capable of moving the audience's emotions. Filled with masculinity, that voice sounded even cheerful.

"Nevertheless, I hereby swear. I shall annex these lands, known as the islands of Japan, to place under my rule, to become territory pledging allegiance to me as the one and only monarch."

The giant silver dragon had declared his intention to make Japan his territory —

However, the audience was thrown into extreme panic and chaos.

After receiving news that a dragon had invaded Tokyo Bay's airspace, relevant ministries issued an emergency evacuation order.

However, the silver dragon had arrived faster than ordinary lesser dragons. Right now, many citizens in urban Yokohama were still making their way towards shelters.

A swirling vortex of shouts, laments, screams, despair, weeping, turmoil, chaos...

The people inside and around the Yokohama Landmark Tower who had yet to escape either ran, stumbled, stood motionless or huddled into a ball, staring blankly at the giant dragon in the sky —

Most people at the scene were plunged into severe confusion.

"I swear that I shall not permit any dragons apart from my minions to approach this country after it becomes my territory. The privilege to trample the nation of Japan is reserved solely under the banner of I, Pavel Galad."

The dragon finally revealed his own name.

However, almost no one in the audience noticed that.

"Starting tomorrow, I will wait for a total of five days. O king or ruler unknown to me, if you wish for my invasion to conclude peacefully, come to me during this time and swear fealty to me."

Satisfied, Pavel Galad looked down upon the chaos on the ground.

"I shall take to the field at sundown on the fifth day. When that time comes, I will rid this country of all swords and fires, engaging repeatedly in destruction, a thorough show of force until you all submit."

Galad extended his right hand. Manifested on his palm was a seal consisting of three Vs in a row.

It was the runic symbol that the dragon king Hannibal had called the Rune of the Sword.

"Frankly speaking, I don't want you to submit easily. Rather than accept humbly offered land, winning territory personally would serve as better proof of one's worth as a warrior—"

In the next instant, a gigantic longsword appeared suddenly in his palm.

"And I am a warrior!"

The sword's double-edged blade was long and thick. The hilt portion was also very long, enough for Galad to hold with both hands with room to spare.

The symbol of the Rune of the Sword was engraved near the base of the blade like an inscription.

Swinging this sword lightly, Galad produced fierce cutting wind.

"Well then, I, Pavel Galad, shall depart from your view for now. We shall meet again!"

Carrying the rune-inscribed longsword, the silver dragon flew away from the Yokohama sky.

However, he did not leave Japan. Instead, he made his way to the wasteland at the Old Tokyo Concession—Its Monolith, the triangular prism of pure black, towering in the center of that area.

It was the super tall structure that the man in black at Alaska had called the "wedge."

Pavel Galad hovered motionlessly in front of its pinnacle then raised his longsword high towards the sky.

"O wedge driven here, I invoke the dragonslaying sword as my seal to serve as the harbinger of my dominance. Acknowledge Pavel Galad as your lord!"

This was precisely the dragonslaying sword. Also his trump card, the "magic wand" in the shape of a sword.

Then that night, at a different location—

Within the Haruga residence located in a quiet corner of the Sumida Ward, Hal and Asya were facing a tower-style PC and monitor in the study.

"Flint, dragonbane, dragonslaying rune... There's no information related to these terms after all."

"But what allowed that rune to revive was the stone in Uncle's effects..."

"Yeah. Hinokagutsuchi said something about 'pouring flames' into the rune."

The two childhood friends were murmuring at each other.

They had completed a basic search of the computer's hard drive and external storage devices. Right now, they had moved on to investigate sources such as digitized books and research notes left behind by Hal's father.

Flint. This word meant a "fire-starting stone."

Where on earth had Hal's father obtained the magical stone bearing this kind of name?

Due to heading over to Old Tokyo to handle "sundry chores" whenever he had time, Hal had not made progress in his research on this side recently. It was time that he applied himself to the nitty-gritty work with gusto—

"Maybe to prevent people from getting information easily, he didn't leave behind any digital resources... That's quite common."

"True. Then we'll have to search the book collection that Pops did not move to this room."

Hal sighed, because the matter was extremely troublesome.

The books and handwritten research notes that his father had not brought here were currently outside of Japan. Furthermore, they were stored in multiple separate locations. Gathering everything together to investigate one by one would be a monumental project, and one that could potentially yield nothing in the end.

"Then there's asking SAURU researchers and witches familiar with Uncle."

"If only there was someone who did research together with Pops."

While the two of them were immersed in their discussion, a voice suddenly sounded from outside the window.

"Enough with this nonsensical search. It seems that you no longer have the luxury of wasting effort on such endeavors."

Hinokagutsuchi's voice. She had apparently gone to the garden.

Speaking of which, Asya should not have met this harsh-tongued girl who styled herself as the devil before. Hal motioned to his childhood friend with his eyes. Having a fairly good idea what was going on, she nodded briefly in response.

The two of them immediately left the study to go to the garden—As expected she was there.

In the guise of a young girl dressed in a scarlet kimono, Hinokagutsuchi was standing motionlessly under the illumination of moonlight.

"Am I supposed to say 'hello, nice to meet you'...?"

Asya tried asking but Hinokagutsuchi's reply was very sloppy.

"A greeting of nice to meet you will suffice. As I have mentioned before, also—Mutual introductions are too much of a hassle. Moving on, look over there."

The self-styled devil's gaze was directed towards the triangular prism of pure black, towering ahead.

The Monolith. Although the structure was located at Marunouchi in Old Tokyo, it was visible from Tokyo New Town because its height exceeded a thousand meters. Asya jumped in surprise.

"Haruomi, please use magical sight."

"Oh okay."

Hal involuntarily reached for his monocle for appraising magical power.

But immediately, he stopped his hand in a hurry, focusing his eyes to stare instead. As before, magical sight activated again without the use of tools. Using his naked eyes, Hal looked out to the tower of pure black—Then reacted in surprise.

This was due to the rune glowing with platinum radiance in the sky above the Monolith.

A magic symbol composed of three Vs stacked together. Hal suddenly understood its meaning.

"Sword...? That word carries the meaning of 'Sword'?"

"Yes. Like your 'Bow,' it is also a dragonslaying rune infused with the power of dragonbane," Hinokagutsuchi remarked casually.

"Since the seal can be seen there, it implies that someone who inherited the power of dragonbane has occupied that 'wedge'—in other words, what you people call a Monolith."

"Occupied, you say?"

"In other words, laying claim to complete authority. A declaration that the 'wedge' driven into this land belongs to him and that the enchanted realm nurtured by this land shall become his *territory* eventually."

"Enchanted realm...?"

"Don't you contemporary magi already know this? Magical power will gradually strengthen in the land where that black column towers, causing earth, water, fire and wind to deviate from the laws of nature."

"In other words, the magical power in the Monolith's vicinity will activate..."

After listening to Hinokagutsuchi, Asya spoke softly.

Akuro-Ou's birthing ritual was chosen to take place in the Old Tokyo Concession precisely because of that.

"Hmm, this city's 'wedge' has matured to an ideal extent. Although a number of dragons have apparently noticed this, I never expected even the Rune of the Sword to make an appearance."

Hinokagutsuchi's turned her arrogant gaze from the Monolith back to Hal and said:

"Judging from the brightness emitted by the rune, the user is not a true king yet. Like you, brat, he is a false king, having acquired nothing more than the eligibility to become king."

"An imposter ruler... Tyrannos—"

Hal recalled what Raak Al Soth had said.

That dragon had mentioned the term "Tyrannos" a number of times. It was an ancient word referring to usurpers, supplanters and tyrants.

"Fufufu. Make no mistake, this nation shall be ruined if an usurper comes to rule it. After all, sapient dragons hate nothing more than false kings—usurpers aspiring to the position of dragon king. Even in the face

of impossible odds, they will still attempt to invade a Tyrannos' domain to exterminate him."

"In other words, elite dragons will be attacking Japan one after another...?" Asya asked skeptically.

This sort of thing was definitely hard to believe.

However, Hinokagutsuchi nodded lightly without denial. Meanwhile, Hal spoke up to confirm something else:

"Last time's elite dragon addressed me with that weird title."

Hal glared at Hinokagutsuchi in a taunting manner.

"In other words, the dragon will treat me the same as that 'Tyrannos' something or other, right? Because I hold a dragonslaying rune."

The scarlet-attired girl revealed a diabolical smile instead of answering.

Hal understood that his guess was correct.

Chapter 3 - The Power of Dragonbane

Part 1

"Yesterday, Yokohama was apparently thrown into chaos because a dragon suddenly flew there."

"I see..."

Inside the UFO Research Club's room, Mutou-san finished speaking while watching the news on a 19-inch flatscreen television, prompting Hal to nod. Shown on the screen were people fleeing from all over urban Yokohama, as well as the silver dragon that happened to be captured on home video.

Although they were having an extended break, because today was a weekday, they still had to attend half a day of lessons.

After school, Hal was curious about the situation at the UFO Research Club so he went to the clubroom to have a look.

"Will internet news have any new scoop? Let's see, 'Last night at around 9pm, a large dragon attacked urban Yokohama. Fortunately, the dragon ended the attack in roughly ten minutes and flew away'... Hmm, almost every media outlet is writing the same thing. It's the same as this morning's."

Mutou-san checked the laptop browser and several newspapers while murmuring.

"However, according to people who happened to be on scene at the time, the dragon apparently said something. It was probably speaking in English. Here, listen to this."

She used the laptop to connect to a certain video uploading website then played an audio-only file.

Noisy voices could be heard from the speaker. Shouting, yelling, crying, screaming, all at the same time. However, someone definitely was delivering a loud speech in a pleasant voice amidst all the noise.

"Someone at the scene recorded this. But since the background is too noisy, you can't make out the words at all."

"Mutou-san, how did you obtain all this information?"

"I have many sources. This came from an acquaintance on the net," answered Mutou-san while smiling proudly.

"I'm going to visit Yokohama later. My plan is to check out the city with my own eyes then meet up with a friend who happened to be at the scene last night."

"Is there any need to go that far for a high school club...?"

"Ahaha. Searching stuff on the net doesn't count as research, you know? After all, lies and wrong information abound and get spread everywhere. You actually need to conduct interviews at the scene."

"You make a fair point."

"However, dragons are really visiting the Kantou region a lot lately. It's already the fourth time this month. It feels a bit too frequent..."

Hal mentally jumped in alarm, because he was reminded of what Hinokagutsuchi had said. "A number of dragons have apparently noticed this—"

"By the way, is your family planning to evacuate or leave the metropolitan area?" asked Hal deceptively.

"Since we're in the middle of an extended break, more than two-thirds of our class is absent anyway, right?"

"My family is quite complacent. They all think that 'Dragons could come flying no matter where you are in the world!' But if the dragon that vanished from Yokohama is lurking near New Town, I guess evacuation would be an option too."

"....."

As a member of SAURU, Hal was privy to undisclosed information.

However, the information obtained from the radio station located at the building and all mass media related personnel who happened to be at the scene was not released to the public. This was because the incident involved an elite dragon and therefore information was kept restricted.

In front of the silent Hal, Mutou-san picked up her schoolbag.

"Oh, transfer student. Thanks for the tea you prepared, it's very good. Then I'm heading out."

"You're welcome—Oh, she already left."

The departed Mutou-san was originally sitting with Hal at the long table in the middle of the room.

With her back towards them, Asya looked up and replied. She was facing a small desk next to the wall, preparing red tea there.

"Still, Mutou-san really takes a lot of initiative..."

"The unexpected perk of joining this research club is that it allows me to reconfirm how ordinary people view reports on dragons."

Asya and Hal made poignant remarks to each other.

"Especially since we've been in SAURU for so long, our perceptions have deviated from the norm. This kind of situation is truly refreshing and interesting. By the way, Asya."

Hal looked at his childhood friend again and changed the subject.

"Can I ask why a member of the Literature Club went out of her way to brew tea here?"

"There's no special significance. If anything, it's to train myself."

Asya responded with an incomprehensible explanation. Just earlier, she had knocked and entered.

Furthermore, she was pushing a clattering trolley that carried black tea leaves and a set of tea ware.

"I've obtained permission from the president... Rather, I should say that it was her orders. She said something about 'go ahead and visit my various clubs whenever you're free!'"

"She's still so mysterious..."

Just as Hal muttered quietly, Asya turned back to her task of brewing black tea.

Her action was filled with a wondrous sense of motion, giving off an impression of distinct rhythm. With her back straight, her standing posture was very proper. Hal could not help but feel his gaze drawn to her. Bemused, Hal cocked his head and went "Hmm?"

He watched Asya cooking many times before. Usually, she went full steam ahead and it would not be strange to hear accompanied shouts of "Urya!", "Orya!" or "Toryaa!" Using brute force to subjugate a large amount of food, her figure was definitely bold and swift.

But right now, she was giving off an impression more like a figure skater in pursuit of artistic points.

Suspiciously, Hal gazed at Asya's back.

She was dressed in the Academy's female uniform. Due to the lower height of the desk where the tea ware was arranged, his childhood friend had to stoop forward slightly. Hal jumped in surprise.

A faint glimpse of the view under her skirt. Out of sight. No, in sight now—Or not?

How incredible. Asya was quite nonchalant about matters on this front. Whenever she was wearing a miniskirt, Hal would sometimes think to himself indifferently behind her back: "Oh, so it's white today..."

Perhaps because she left herself completely open, he did not feel any excitement at all.

But this tension of faint glimpses just now was truly refreshing—

"Excuse me, Haruomi?"

Hal came to his senses to find Asya looking at him shyly.

"Could it be... You saw it?"



"What are you referring to?"

"Basically, uh... No. N-Nothing."

During the conversation, the childhood friend suddenly held down the back of her skirt with both hands.

Hal found it rather curious. Why was he getting this sort of disappointed feeling...?

"Speaking of which, the president's absent when clearly an incident of that sort happened the previous day."

"She went to attend the Drama Club's rehearsal 'that must not be missed no matter what,' insisting something like 'I am the only one who can wear the Nurarihyon youkai mask!'"

"What the heck is that play about? I'm so curious..."

After having tea in the clubroom, the two of them left the UFO Research Club.

Asya returned to the Literature Club whereas Hal made his way to the underground floors of the library adjacent to the clubs building.

Hal was told that the underground space would become the Mansion's substitute facility within the next few days. Things were supposed to have arrived this morning, which was why Hal came to check.

Several large racks were transported here for placing books and magic apparatus later on.

Walking among them, Hal jumped in surprise, because he found a familiar face.

"Ah, Haruomi-kun. How serendipitous, fancy running into you here."

"What a big coincidence. I didn't expect you to be here, Hiiragi-san."

"After all, the children under my care will be placed here soon, so I was thinking I should come and check."

Hiiragi Yukari, SAURU's technical consultant. Despite his surprise at this unexpected encounter, Hal still asked what he wanted to know the most.

"The silver elite that appeared in Yokohama is lurking in Old Tokyo after all, right?"

"Rather than lurking, he is gracefully making his temporary residence there. Want to have a look?"

Hiiragi-san took out a tablet computer from her bag.

Shown on the LCD screen was a blurred image. It was probably taken by an unmanned drone.

The overhead view showed what appeared to be somewhere in Old Tokyo. Shining with metallic silver luster, the elite was sitting there with his eyes closed, his body curled up in leisure.

In addition, the building behind where he was lying down looked very familiar.

It was the former National Diet Building, a historic site that used to be the center of Japanese politics in the past.

"Volunteering to conquer Japan and choosing to stay at Nagatachō. Now that's what you call ironic."

"And openly too, without using magic to hide. However, he seems to detest getting disturbed. Reportedly, every spy plane sent to monitor him was destroyed."

"If this were a Hollywood movie from the past, the American military would probably fire a nuclear missile in this situation."

"But past precedent has already shown that nuclear weapons don't work against the defensive magic of elites."

Hal and Hiiragi-san exchanged nods.

The elite dragon's speech was virtually drowned out by background noise on video upload sites, but Hal and company had already watched the clear and complete version that was not released to the public.

Likewise undisclosed was news that the elite dragon calling himself Pavel Galad was currently in Old Tokyo...

"A bronze elite appeared just half a month ago and this time it's silver? The number of times Raptors flew to the vicinity of the Kantou region in the past two months has been high. Are these two linked after all?"

Hiiragi-san sighed.

Although Hal knew the answer, he could not speak it. Instead, he said, "By the way, can I ask a question? Was the dragon's demand reported to the government?"

"Yes. Even the government doesn't dare procrastinate with a leisurely 'Wait and see' response. Instead, they quickly declared that 'hostile neighbors who threaten our nation's sovereignty should be firmly asked to leave the country immediately' —"

"Was this message delivered?"

"They seem like they really have the intention. But if our battle against Pavel Galad ends in failure, they might very well try to make the most of a hopeless situation and send an emissary."

Asya and Orihime had already agreed to fight the elite. Hal had heard them talking about it in the classroom, so he tried asking:

"Although there are a few days left, when are we going to make a move?"

"The last second until the deadline, when we've gathered enough 'serpents' for reinforcements... But there might be a limit to how long we can wait."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid that dragon might get impatient and start going on a rampage before the deadline."

After pointing out the belligerent personality of elites, Hiiragi-san made a worried expression.

"Actually, I came here today in hopes of checking on Orihime-san and Hazumi-san. If they're feeling nervous, I could chat with them too."

"Shirasaka too? This time, she should be staying on standby at New Town, right?"

"Yes, but she is that kind of 'good girl' after all. She probably feels very strongly about her inability to take part in battle."

After parting ways with Hiiragi-san, Hal left the school. It was already evening.

Hal went to the nearest train station at Ryougoku to take the Loop Line because he intended to go home directly. Taking out his touchscreen cellphone, he brought up some pictures.

They were photos of a wasteland. What they depicted was not a Japanese town.

Instead, it was a view of New York State's Old Manhattan Concession. Also a Monolith. A triangular prism of pure black was towering over the place previously known as Wall Street.

These photos had been taken using Visual Reprint, in other words, a spell for printing out images seen through magical sight.

Above the Monolith at the former Wall Street, a large rune of Ruruk Soun, which humanity still had yet to decipher, was traced out in platinum-colored light.

A pictogram consisting of sharp rhombus connected to the tip of a long straight line.

For a long time, humans still could not understand what it meant, but now, Hal could see it from a single glance.

This was the dragonslaying runic symbol signifying the Rune of the Spear.

"I guess the Monolith at Old Warsaw probably has a dragonslaying seal too..."

A glowing dragonslaying rune on top of a Monolith was a declaration of occupation—

That was what Hinokagutsuchi had said. And the Old Manhattan Concession was Red Hannibal's while the Old Warsaw Concession was the territory ruled by the "dragon king-class" Caesar Draconis named the Black Lightning Emperor.

Due to reaching Narihirabashi Station, which was closest to home, Hal put away his cellphone.

Then getting off the train, he started on his journey home. Finally reaching his house, he found a girl at his doorstep. It was Shirasaka Hazumi. Why was she here? Just as Hal wondered, Hazumi approached him.

"Haruga-san, I have a favor to beg of you!"

Normally very reserved and polite, Hazumi was making a rare display of forcefulness today.

"Please allow me to meet Hinokagutsuchi-san. Haruga-san, I would like to ask her why the power of your rune could not be entrusted to Nee-sama!"

"Huh?"

With serious eyes, Hazumi gazed intently at the troubled Hal.

Part 2

The first holiday in May, Golden Week, was finally in full swing.

On this morning, Hal and Juujouji Orihime agreed to meet up at the cafe in front of Ryougoku Station. Based on this description alone, one might conclude that they were a couple on a date.

However, there were two additional participants on this occasion.

"Listen carefully, little lady. Simply stated, both the brat and the priestess are lacking in mutual resolve."

"R-Resolve is it?"

A four-person round table in the open-air cafe's terrace.

Seated around the table together with Hal and Orihime, Hinokagutsuchi and Hazumi began to converse. After listening to the request Hazumi had visited the Haruga residence the previous night to make, the lazy self-styled devil had given the following reply.

Get a hold of the priestess named Orihime or whatever she was called. Although it was a pain, she would instruct them this once...

"I shall cut straight to the chase, brat. Approach the priestess immediately and tell her 'I want you. Give everything of yours to me.'"

"D-Did you just say everything? Don't be ridiculous, Kagutsuchi-san!"

Orihime could not help but protest against the absurd suggestion. However, Hinokagutsuchi remained unfazed.

"Priestess, I would advise you to read the mood and answer 'I am willing to offer you my body and soul' in one fell swoop, obediently allowing yourself to be deceived just once. This would allow the matter to be resolved to everyone's satisfaction."

"M-More and more ridiculous. Absolutely not!"

"I don't think it's possible for Juujouji and I to do that..."

"Such a level of mutual resolve is necessary for you two. That is, if you wish to establish a vassal covenant."

Dressed in a scarlet kimono as usual, Hinokagutsuchi was just a cute little girl in appearance.

Such a being was arrogantly reclining in her open-air seat. In addition, there was the additional presence of Orihime and Hazumi, two young beauties. Consequently, the group was attracting plenty of attention from customers and staff in the cafe as well as pedestrians passing by outside.

However, perhaps such a lineup ended up producing an aura of intimidation. Not even a single customer sat near them.

" "....." "

Hal only figured it out after listening to the self-styled devil's sloppy instructions. I see, so that's why I can't entrust the Bow's power to her? Meanwhile, Hazumi seemed quite shocked.

"H-Hand over everything... To offer one's body and soul, in other words..."

Hazumi's face turned bright red while she huddled her slender body and murmured.

Seeing her cousin like that, Orihime hastily said, "H-Hazumi, Kagutsuchi-san is simply making an analogy. Don't get led astray—D-Don't think of it in romantic terms!"

"I-Is that how it goes?"

"Hmm? No, priestess. If you are mentally prepared to go all the way, even at the cost of sharing a bed together, the vassal covenant will be easier to complete."

"—Go all the way!?"

"Don't imagine it. Seriously, don't do it, Hazumi!"

"Conversely, if the brat has the mettle to think 'I will surely make this woman mine' then the matters will be different again. Hmm."

Hazumi looked feverish, Orihime was flustered, while Hinokagutsuchi was putting on a knowing look.

After listening to the conversation between the three girls, Hal had no choice but to keep quiet. Helpless, he could only space out and think "so Juujouji will cry out 'don't' repeatedly when she gets flustered"—Just at that moment...

"B-But Haruga-san already has Asya-san as his girlfriend. Even thinking about proceeding with this would be wrong..."

"Y-You really need to stop thinking about weird things. I'm about to get mad, okay!?"

Noticing Hazumi's misconception, Hal quietly interjected:

"Oh, not at all. That's not the kind of relationship Asya and I share."

"Really? S-Sorry, I jumped to conclusions."

Hazumi bowed her head deeply in response. But the instant she looked up, a puzzled expression appeared on her face that was as cute as an angel's.

"E-Excuse me, may I ask a question? How do you feel about Orihime-neesama, Haruga-san? I don't have any special intentions, but how do you view her as a woman, a member of the opposite sex..."

"H-Hazumi!?"

"Nee-sama, I-I really don't have any special intentions. I'm just a bit curious..."

After clumsily paying lip service to her troubled cousin, Hazumi gazed unerringly at Hal.

Was this what one called pure and innocent? Hal somewhat prided himself on his eloquence, but for some reason, he felt no desire to exercise this skill.

Aware that he was no match for Hazumi's gaze, Hal said:

"Hmm... Well, I guess she's a very attractive person."

"I-In that case, the rest depends on what Nee-sama thinks... I-I suddenly have something urgent to attend to!"

Hazumi stood up, causing her chair to screech.

Frantically with trembling hands, she took out her purse, put down money on the table for the cafe latte she had apparently drunk earlier, then bolted for the exit.

"N-Now for the youngsters to proceed at their own pace...!"

Leaving parting words like a marriage agent, Hazumi left.

"Wait, Hazumi!? Sheesh, she always loves to worry..."

"Oh my, you are about to fight an elite after all, Juujouji. She probably wants you to gain some more weapons. However, it's thanks to Shirasaka that we have this excellent chance."

Just as Orihime was grumbling, Hal finally managed to talk properly.

This was all due to the decrease in the female fraction. He first stared at Hinokagutsuchi who was sitting across him directly then turned his gaze towards the western sky.

Their current location at the cafe provided a vantage point with excellent visibility.

Hence, it was possible to see the tallest structure in the Tokyo area, the pure-black Monolith.

There was also the Rune of the Sword shining with platinum light above its pinnacle.

"I believe it's time for you to spill the beans honestly as a *former* dragon. It's perfectly fine to talk here today, right?"

"Hoo— Actually, I am not someone who likes to put on airs."

Confronted with Hal's calm questioning, the alleged ghost of an elite dragon, Hinokagutsuchi, spoke.

"Revealing too much before time is ripe would be a fool's behavior. Such a mistake would be impossible for one as wise as I am. However, it is almost time indeed — "

Hinokagutsuchi looked out to the Monolith as well. Orihime seemed to realize what they were looking at. After blinking a few times, she gazed in the same direction and nodded.

Magical sight was apparently activating successfully. In the next second —

"Well then, Queen, allow me to make introductions next."

A voice suddenly spoke. It was a strongly astringent voice that sounded rusted.

"O young man who inherited the dragonslaying bow, I shall offer you my blessings first of all. I am very happy for your existence. Allow me to congratulate you."

Without them noticing, a man in a black suit had started standing behind Hal and the others.

The man was in the prime of life. His well-proportioned face likewise emanated an aura of astringency. He was also tall in stature.

However, his race was indeterminate. For an oriental, his facial features were too deep-set. His tanned skin was too dark to be Caucasian, but he did not have any negroid features visible either.

"I am Sophocles, in charge of facilitating the Road to Kingship—the grand yet barbaric game revolving around dragons, runes and the earth. My work could also be described as running errands."

While introducing his name, the suspicious man sat down in Hazumi's former seat.

Then with a great sense of familiarity, he called for a waitress and ordered a cup of coffee.

Part 3

"Contemporary humans refer to sapient dragons as elites... Between dragons, they are known as the Zizou."

After a sip of coffee, Sophocles began to explain tirelessly.

"Actually, all of the Zizou share a common objective. Namely, to seek eligibility to enter the Road to Kingship, vowing to reach this road's endpoint no matter what it takes."

"All elites?"

Hal muttered and peered at Hinokagutsuchi's face. Regarding the explanation given by the man who seemed to be her old acquaintance, the girl who called herself the devil shrugged then crossed her arms. She looked like she intended to listen quietly.

Meanwhile, the dumbstruck Orihime was listening intently to what Sophocles had to say.

"Indeed, that is the nature of the creatures known as the Zizou. Following the Road to Kingship to the very end is their ultimate wish. It is for this purpose that they raise their intelligence and hone their magic so as to allow the mysterious power of runes to inhabit their resilient bodies..."

"This 'kingship' you speak of... Would that be referring to the dragon kings?"

In response to Hal's question, Sophocles looked straight at him and nodded firmly.

"Correct, becoming dragon kings is precisely the cherished wish of all Zizou. However, the key to the Road to Kingship is not easy to find. For the sake of their quest, the Zizou wander between the earth's surface and underground, dive to the very depths of the sea, and even fly to the sky to enter the domain of the stars."

Hal could not help but look at his right hand. The hand where the Rune of the Bow resided.

At this moment, Sophocles smiled. That being said, it was extremely faint.

"Your comprehension is very strong, young man. Your imagination is correct. That dragonslaying rune is precisely the key for entering the Road to Kingship—It is what makes you eligible."

Sophocles whispered solemnly as though reciting a prayer.

"That is precisely why the Zizou bear a grudge towards those who inherit the power of dragonbane. In their eyes, these inheritors are beings who could potentially become dragon kings faster than them. To those who have stepped foot into the Road to Kingship, they give the title Tyrannos—false kings. Their desire to kill these false kings at every opportunity is completely driven by these feelings of hatred and jealousy."

"So that's why Soth saw me as a thorn in his side..."

"O young man, I know not whether you have the passion for advancing along the Road to Kingship, but you must become strong in order to survive. No matter what kind of dragon comes to challenge you, you must repel them then exterminate them in turn. Since you cannot commit suicide easily, this is your only recourse."

"C-Can't commit suicide? What do you mean by that?"

"The dragonslaying runes are the supreme symbols of Ruruk Soun. Even though their forms have changed, they have endured to this day since the ancient age of myths. A mark of indestructibility. Bearers of such runes cannot possibly die so easily."

Sophocles stared at Hal with an extremely sincere expression.

"The runes confer imperishable indestructibility to a certain extent, but of course, not to the point of invincible immortality. It is essentially impossible to die by hanging yourself. If you intend to commit suicide, then be prepared to spend a commensurate number of years to make perfectly thorough preparations."

Hal gasped. Next to him, Orihime also felt shocked.

The cheerful classmate, who was always as bright and cheerful as the sun, went pale this time.

"Be that as it may, young man, if you intend to die, there is no need to worry. Just devote your full effort to fighting powerful dragons. Warriors capable of challenging usurpers should have various mystical techniques in their arsenal to destroy imperishable bodies."

"....."

Leaving Hal speechless, Sophocles brought his cup to his lips. Perhaps the coffee had gone cold already, so he finished it in one go. Then he said:

"Please feel free to summon me any time if you make up your mind to follow the Road to Kingship to become a dragon king."

"S-Summon you?"

"Indeed. By *conquering water, sky and earth*, successors to the power of dragonbane can become even stronger. If you wish for power as befits kingship, do consider what lands you intend to conquer then make a proposal as a trial. The more you increase your territories, the greater

your power will grow, while at the same time, the closer you will get to becoming a dragon king..."

"Y-You're saying that I can become a dragon king?"

"It might take years, decades or even centuries before you ascend to the throne. O young man, I hope you will survive well before that day arrives."

Sophocles made that faint smile of his in the end, thereby ending the explanation.

However, Hal retorted strongly:

"Hold on, there's a decisive point of contention in what you said just now. I'm a human, not a dragon. How can I possibly become a dragon king!?"

"Racial difference does not constitute any barrier."

In contrast, Sophocles answered very calmly.

"In the past, the type of non-dragon creatures known as "hybrid" dragons—In truth, they were unexpectedly commonplace. Of course, pure dragons were very numerous too."

Hybrids, pure dragons. Getting a vague sense of the meaning of these words, Hal instantly felt his spine run cold.

"You mean they were humans to begin with but transformed into dragons...?"

A complete transformation of ordinary humans, reborn as dragons. This was totally unheard of, yet Hal found himself unable to laugh.

His terrifying experience with the Rune of the Bow prevented him.

"However, it is fine too if you have no intention of becoming a dragon king."

"....."

"Speaking of which, it is rather curious how among the dragon kings, there are many who remain indifferent to the Road to Kingship despite having obtained the power of dragonbane, devoting themselves to single-minded pursuit of their own paths. This includes King Hannibal for instance. The same goes for Princess Yukikaze. Perhaps that approach might suit you more."

After Sophocles finished, Orihime finally spoke up for the first time in a while. With a fearful expression, she asked:

"Knowing so much, who on earth are you...? One would think you're a dragon too...?"

"No, priestess. He is human."

Instead of Sophocles, it was Hinokagutsuchi who answered.

"Like all of you here, this man is human. During the height of heavenly Hyperborea in the past, he was known as an unrivaled sorcerer. He was a priest who served ancient gods. At the same time, he is also an immortal who has obtained eternal life."

Finally breaking her silence, Hinokagutsuchi spoke with mockery in her tone.

Hal glared at Sophocles and felt compelled to ask:

"Why would someone like that side with the dragons...?"

"Rather than siding with the dragons, I simply play the role of facilitator in the Road to Kingship game where the exceptional existences called dragon kings are born. In other words, I run errands. You can even call it fanning the flames."

"Fanning the flames?"

"Yes. I simply wish to watch. Using these eyes to witness the world in flames due to the conflagrations known as dragon kings, the dazzling light given off by life and chaos—"

These were his last words before he left. A spring breeze blew by.

Then Sophocles vanished, as suddenly as he had appeared. Hal silently shook his head then sighed.

Part 4

After Sophocles' departure, Hal pulled himself together, only to find that the bill had also vanished from the table.

He called the waitress to confirm and discovered that everyone's order had been paid for, apparently the doing of the man in the black suit when he left.

"He does things quite thoughtfully for someone who's clearly involved with dragons..."

Collapsing in his chair in exhaustion, Hal muttered.

Then he turned his tired eyes towards Hinokagutsuchi who was seated directly opposite him.

"Personally, I'd really like to think that more than half of what he said was total bullshit."

"It is your freedom to do so. The truth is that you will experience it personally sooner or later. It is quite unimportant whether the timing is slightly hastened or postponed."

Hal instantly felt a wave of fatigue from hearing this kind of answer that evaded all responsibility. Hal worried whether the dragonslaying rune's excessive firepower could entail some kind of troublesome trap—

"Just for reference, let me ask a question. Does your appearance change into a dragon when you become a dragon king?"

"It is not entirely uncommon to dragonify even without becoming king, assuming the dragonslaying rune turns into a weapon to make its wielder closer to a dragon."

"....."

"But there is no need to be too concerned. Relax."

Despite asking him to relax, Hinokagutsuchi's tone of voice was not gentle at all.

"Whether humans or dragons, the majority of those who obtain the power of dragonbane will die before it matures. A moment's carelessness during successive challenges from Zizou and they end up slaughtered as usurpers."

"I see..."

"I cannot think of even one reason why you will become a rare exception."

"Thank you for your heartwarming provision of information. It's definitely a valuable reference."

Sighing deeply with mixed emotions, Hal muttered:

"So that's what you meant when you told me not to thank you for saving my life..."

"Hmph, if you had burned to death there, you could have died normally."

After grumbling about something said in the past, Hinokagutsuchi rose from her seat.

Hal did not know if she was concerned about the gazes of bystanders, but she did not vanish instantaneously. Instead, she walked out of the cafe on her own two feet.

"Struggle all you like. Ultimately, if you manage to become the greatest hero of the era, perhaps you might even be able to advance 'farther along.'"

Leaving these words behind, Hinokagutsuchi departed.

Only Hal and Orihime were left at the cafe's open-air seating.

However, Hal had no energy to spare towards attending to the girl sharing his table. He simply sat there, spacing out.

A human turning into a dragon—How could there be something so absurd? But that happening to himself was definitely a possibility.

Things were getting more and more ridiculous.

Although he was not the type to revel in angst-filled monologue to curse destiny, he still needed plenty of venting. Like 'give me a fucking break.'

"What a pain..."

Just as Hal was muttering quietly to himself...

The girl seated to him, looking at him in worry, suddenly asked:

"So, Haruga-kun, are you free today?"

"Huh?"

"Regardless of whether you're free or not... Would you like to go on a date with me later?"

Suddenly making a suggestion, Orihime had recovered her usual cheer.

"Aren't we going to be fighting the silver dragon next? I was thinking we should relax a bit before that."

"I suppose you may have a point..."

"We ought to be entitled to taking out one day of the break for a change of pace, right?"

Orihime was probably making this suggestion in concern for Hal's low spirits. Hal's ability to read the mood was not so poor that he would fail to notice this—

Hal smiled faintly. He tried his best to calm his mind and pull himself together.

After roughly twenty seconds of silence, Hal gave a very uncharacteristic answer.

"Yes. Indeed, a date every now and then would be nice."

Thirty minutes later, Hal and Orihime arrived at a cinema's lobby.

Hal did not know if the recent "Dragon Appearance in Yokohama!" headline was to blame, but the crowd was rather thin despite the current extended holiday.

Orihime checked the list of movies available and said:

"I ask this only because I am convinced the following statement is absolutely impossible."

"What?"

"Haruga-kun, you are a seasoned veteran in the battlefield known as the dating scene, having gone on countless dates with the ladies—Oh, I mean girls other than Asya-san—How's that? If that were the case, I was thinking I could simply leave everything to you as my escort."

The beautiful classmate looked mischievously at Hal's face from beside him.

"Or should I treat you as a recruit who has never seen actual combat?"

"So you're belittling my ability?"

"Rather than belittling, it would be better to say I am trying to analyze your strength as calmly as possible."

"Don't underestimate me—"

"If you have the guts to say 'I want you' explicitly, Haruga-kun, I will prostrate myself and apologize to you."

"...You in prostration, now that's something I'd like to see."

"Fufu. Your reaction is exactly as I predicted. I guess I should go easy on you with the comments."

"But wait, Juujouji. If you're saying that, can I treat you as a seasoned veteran?"

"Eh, me?"

"If that's the case, please offer guidance on how to navigate this battlefield. After all, you totally called my experience level. I'm really looking forward to your exciting stories."

"Uh, well..."

"Given our friendship, there's no need to be shy, right?"

"Ahem. A novice would do well to find a fellow novice to make plans through detailed discussion, then slowly decide the route to climb the mountain. That is what I believe to be the proper way."

Orihime waggled her index finger while deliberately putting on a serious face.

"So, Haruga-kun, let's discuss which movie we are going to watch. I'm very curious about that *Mr. Hawkwood*."

"Let's see... 'The heroic exploits of a mercenary during the darkness of medieval Europe. A tale of iron, blood and trickery, where betrayal and murderous hostility only serves to make oneself stronger. Fight, Hawkwood. This is the first neighborhood of Hell...' Hmm, there isn't a single actress among the main cast. I think it'll be very interesting."

Orihime was pointing to a poster whose color theme was dark overall, without any glamor to speak of.

The protagonist depicted in the photo was clad in a matching set of an iron helmet, plate armor and chain mail covering his entire body.

He had his weapon raised high. A large war hammer, in other words, a steel shaft fitted with a heavy weight on one end. Because blades were ineffective against enemies protected by full-body armor, bludgeoning enemies to death was the solution. How old school to choose such a weapon. Too old school.

"But is this a movie that should be watched by two people going on their first date together?"

"Then how about 'My Neighbor Seki 3'? Or 'From a Board Game on a School Desk to a New World. The World Cup this time! Fight on Japan's behalf!' That's what's written there."

"I'd watch this one even if I were by myself. I'd most likely buy the DVD too."

In fact, diabetes-inducing romance movies were also showing.

However, they did not seem to catch Orihime's eyes at all. In this regard, one might say that she was truly living up to her past nickname as the "Kotengu of Fukakawa." In any case, after some discussion, Hal and Orihime decided to watch a popular action movie adapted from an American comic.

Taking out their own money to buy their respective tickets, choosing two neighboring seats.

After a slight pause to think, Orihime bought a large size popcorn as well.

Before the movie started, the two of them entered the dimmed interior and took their seats. Orihime immediately proceeded to put down the bucket of popcorn between herself and Hal.

"Sharing the same bucket of popcorn between the two of us, doesn't this make it seem like we're a real couple? In a fashion—No, since it's a rare *date* after all, this is the bare minimum."

Orihime smiled, leaned over from the adjacent seat and whispered with her face up close.

Hal felt inexplicably frightened by this. Then the movie finally began.

After fully enjoying the two-hour show, the two of them went on to have lunch together.

As befitted their identity as high school students, they went to a fast food joint next to the cinema and ordered from the set menu. Then taking a brief walk towards the Sumida River, they arrived at a riverside park.

A sunny May afternoon. The gentle breeze blowing across the riverside felt very comfortable.

"If you're okay with it, how about I treat you to something as thanks for today?"

"I can't think of a reason why you need to treat me... But since you brought it up already, I'll take you up on the offer."

Orihime smiled in response when Hal made his suggestion in front of a soft drink vending machine.

He bought two cans of green tea and passed one to Orihime. Although he felt that this gift was too cheap, at least it counted as a sincere gesture of gratitude.

Looking out to the Sumida River together, side by side, Hal and Orihime began drinking their tea.

"Do I actually look that depressed?"

"A little. Your countenance is haggard and the usual poker face is nowhere to be seen."

"Oh dear."

"But now, you look more like the usual Haruga-kun."

Orihime smiled demurely.

Haruga Haruomi was not an indomitable tough guy. Consequently, if he looked like he had recovered his vigor, it was probably thanks to her, even though Orihime was clearly the one who was about to fight an elite dragon for the second time. Furthermore, she had entered the world of witches only recently.

In terms of being in a difficult predicament, she and Hal were not too different.

Hal took a deep breath and said, "I've recalled the magic words that are particularly effective in times like these."

"What are they?"

"'We'll cross that bridge when we get to it.' Think about it, it's not like we're out of options immediately. It'd be more constructive to prioritize weapons that are effective against elites."

Hal deliberately extolled optimism. However, there was nothing he could do when they reached the "bridge" for real.

He hoped that his future self would have the ability to evade danger...

"Given this rare chance, allow me to make thorough and effective use of this burdensome rune. So long as Asya-san, Rushalka and I are together, there will surely be a way to use it."

"Needless to say, I'll help out too. That goes without saying."

After Hal smiled in an intentionally frivolous manner, Orihime added, "I really wish that rune could be used on my Akuro-Ou too."

"I agree but we can't help it if it doesn't work."

"Yes. Then I've decided to stop worrying. No matter how powerful the enemy, Haruga-kun, I believe you will activate that incomprehensible superpower to rescue us with perfect timing just like in manga."

"Are you sure it's okay to expect someone like me to turn in a performance like in a hot-blooded shounen manga?" Hal disagreed tactfully in the face of Orihime's optimism.

However, she smiled and was not bothered by it.

"Don't worry. Although it does feel like a miscast, Haruga-kun, you are a boy after all. Where there is a will, there is a way."

"Unfounded idealism will only lead to failure, right...?"

"Is there anything wrong with idealism? The likes of a man's pride and honor are things that I don't dislike."

Hal found it difficult to argue against that.

Although he was not a witch himself, Hal was her senior in the business. However, all he had done today was cause Orihime to worry about him the whole time. Wasn't it time for his turn to look after her?

This concerned "a man's honor." Hal did his best to speak casually.

"Got it. I'll try my best to handle things appropriately."

"You should act cool in times like these and assert 'I will protect you no matter what' without any basis or vision. That would be the correct answer in shounen manga, right?"

Orihime seemed quite familiar with manga aimed at that particular demographic.

Finding her reading habits quite fitting for a self-styled "tomboy," Hal could not suppress a wry smile.

"Going along with your line of thinking, I'll also need narrow vision and excessive narcissism in addition to honor and pride. That's setting the bar a bit too high—However."

Without averting his eyes away from the especially dazzling Orihime, Hal said, "I will try my hardest to handle things appropriately. Honestly."

His voice sounded even more serious than he had imagined.

Part 5

Hiiragi Yukari had said "it would be best if we don't wait until the last second before the five-day deadline is up."

As dictated by these words, it was decided that an offense would be launched ahead of the deadline against the elite dragon currently sitting in the Old Tokyo Concession.

In other words, the next day after Hal and Orihime's "date."

As always, this emergency decision was apparently influenced by the fact that *serpents could not be gathered for reinforcements*.

"Since the dragon declared the conquest of Japan, it is only logical that they can't maintain uninvolvedness... But because last time Soth was defeated by relying on New Town's 'serpents' alone, the others are taking a 'wait and see' approach. In truth, Asya and Rushalka's power is renowned all over the world. Everyone is saying that there will be a solution just by relying on them—That's what I heard."

Hal explained the situation to Orihime.

Since there was no advantage in waiting, it was pointless to delay the inevitable. Hence, Asya and Orihime quickly got ready to head to Old Tokyo.

To avoid the elite dragon's magic, no one escorted them along the way, of course.

However, Hal alone accompanied them as support personnel. Nominally, he was described as someone possessing abilities useful in this situation.

Driving a large four-wheel drive vehicle, Hal set off together with the two witches.

Recently, he had been handle certain "sundry chores" in Old Tokyo whenever he had time to spare. Thanks to that, his grasp of the geography was completely restored. Hal drove steadily for an hour or two.

Arriving at the Hibiya Park, he stopped the car. They were already very near their destination.

It was after 2pm. The weather was cloudy.

"If possible, let's try launching a surprise attack."

Before disembarking, they held a final meeting. Asya was the first to speak.

"We'll do it without getting our hopes too high. After all, the target is an elite, so whether it succeeds will depend on the enemy's personality."

"Personality? What do you mean by that?"

"In other words, a cautious dragon would deploy meticulous defensive magic, remaining on alert even while sleeping. In such a case, a surprise attack must not be undertaken no matter how impatient you are.

However, if the opponent can't be bothered to take such precautions, you'll find a way as long as you prepare properly—That's what I've been told."

Since this was knowledge learned directly from his childhood friend, Hal repeated it to Orihime in a quoting tone of voice.

Meanwhile, the veteran witch Asya seemed to be worrying about other matters.

"I feel very concerned that this elite is too unguarded. I can't believe he's brazenly sleeping in a conspicuous location in the wasteland."

In the past few days, as well as before the New Town invasion, they had been using surveillance drones—small autonomous unmanned helicopters—and investigative magic to keep tabs on the dragon.

"Isn't he afraid of getting attacked?"

"Chances are higher that he's tempting us to attack."

"In fact, he probably doesn't care whether anyone listened to his speech at Yokohama asking Japan to surrender! There won't be a fight if the humans surrender. He probably doesn't want that."

"But we have a trump card. Isn't that right?"

Orihime finished as though summing up. Hal and Asya nodded.

Next, they were going to improvise while following a plan.

As a side note, Hal still had not told his childhood friend about yesterday's encounter with the man named Sophocles or the content of the conversation that had taken place. Hal and Orihime had decided this together. Since it would only complicate the situation further, they intended to keep quiet until the current incident was resolved...

"By the way, are you sure you want to be wearing that?" Hal asked, looking at the school uniforms of his childhood friend and Orihime.

Even though they were clearly going to fight a dragon, both girls were in school uniform.

"I heard that Japan's witches don't have any special combat uniform, so to differentiate from my casual wear, I'd like to fight in something I could consider a victory outfit."

Orihime answered nonchalantly.

"Also, a high school's formal uniform works out perfectly, so I might as well wear our school's uniform."

"I decided to follow suit after hearing what Orihime-san intended to wear."

Asya had put on her frequently worn military jacket over her uniform. As a side note, Hal was dressed totally casually in a denim jacket paired with black jeans.

As long as they were fine with it, Hal thought to himself irresponsibly then took out a pocket watch.

Hal's oft-used Clockwork Mage was a tool for generating magical power.

Due to his work as what would be called a professional treasure hunter, Hal knew a variety of magic for exploration and stealth movement. He even knew more than Asya, a Level 5 witch.

Techniques acquired through necessity-driven learning were the best after all—

"How do you conjure images in your mind when using magic? I totally don't have a clue."

"Just use your own approach. There's not much point in imitating others."

"Those who can vividly conjure detailed images, imitable by no one, are actually the type of people who become excellent magi."

Hal offered beginner advice while conjuring an image in his mind. A scene where he, Asya and Orihime were moving as shadows with their sound, appearance and physical form erased—

Then with the three of them as the target, he cast three types of magic one after another—

First was Sound Suppression, followed by Visual Interference and finally Olfactory Nullification.

By using these spells, Hal and company would only cause faint sound even if their bodies or carried objects made large movements, they became as inconspicuous as camouflaged insects, and even creatures with a keen sense of smell would have difficulty detecting their scent.

(Then let's go.)

Asya gestured, urging the group to set off. Due to Sound Suppression being active, even the volume of speech was dampened, so it was impossible to hear one another unless you spoke in the listener's ear.

With the Level 5 witch in the lead, Orihime and Hal followed in that order.

Hibiya Park was very close to their destination. After walking on foot along Uchibori Street for a while, the National Diet Building's staid appearance came into view. Continuing on would reach the National Diet Building's main entrance. Nearby was a highway—what was formerly the Shuto Expressway.

The trio stopped at an intersection near Sakurada Gate.

The next set of traffic lights was located at the National Diet Entrance intersection, in other words, right in front of the National Diet Building.

And lying at the Diet Building's doorstep was a dragon. Ten-odd meters in length, an entity covered in dragon scales of metallic silver.

It was Pavel Galad, the elite that had appeared at Yokohama.

With his tail against his head and wings folded, the posture was like an oval shape. With eyes completely shut, he looked like he was sleeping. To confirm, Hal invoked Heat Sensing magic.

Dragons were commonly perceived to be cold-blooded animals similar to reptiles.

It was unknown if having *flames* inside their bodies was the explanation, but active dragons clearly had a higher body temperature than when

sleeping. Just to be safe, Hal used magic to check but could not confirm the high temperature indicating activity.

Hal nodded to the two witches in his company.

Next, it was their turn to enter the stage. Asya and Orihime suddenly tossed out their trump card.

(O ancient divine seal of purity, let the transient blue dragon manifest over our heads!")

(Akuro-Ou, come fight by my side!)

Under the effects of Sound Suppression, their voices only sounded like private whispering.

However, two glowing pentagrams appeared in the sky above in response to their calls. Turning into infinity symbols at the same time, they ultimately materialized into two leviathans.

Nine-tailed Akuro-Ou, the fox-wolf bearing white fur and glowing with red light.

And Rushalka, the faint-blue wyvern. On her forehead was a long and single horn.

Suddenly appearing, these dragonoid homunculi carried immense magical power within them. The pulsation of this magical power apparently stimulated the senses of the nearby sleeping dragon.

Pavel Galad's massive body shuddered violently then his left eyelid slowly rose.

However, Orihime and Akuro-Ou had already sprung into action.

"Akuro-Ou! Use Fire magic—pseudo-divinity. Make haste!"

Responding to her covenantee's directions, Akuro-Ou extended her nine tails in the air.

The sight was almost like a giant flower blooming in the sky. Next, a blazing fireball appeared on each tip of the nine tails and were launched to the ground all at once.

Naturally, the fire was hurtling towards the silver dragon, Pavel Galad.

Struck directly by the nine fireballs, the giant body of metallic silver began to burn intensely.

The explosive flames roared fiercely. Lying in a vortex of fire, the dragon should not have enough time to invoke his rune of Ruruk Soun to defend. However—

"Here at last. I have been waiting ages for you... Waiting for humans who challenge dragons! Has that moment finally arrived now!?"

A silhouette stood up amidst the explosive flames in front of the National Diet Building.

Lifting its long neck and spreading its wings, the silhouette had a dragon's form.

"Looks like you are in hiding. Please hurry and show yourselves. O brave warriors who dare challenge dragonkind, I shall brand your deaths deeply upon my retinas!"

Tiny pulses of magic were released together with the voice, spreading out around the explosive flames.

The three types of magic that Hal had used to hide the three of them were all dispelled.

"Over there, yes? Your courage and flames have made my blood boil with excitement. Please allow me to use this hot blood to incinerate you all!"

He looked like he had discovered Hal's group that was one block away.

The silver dragon's voice was stern and dignified, filled with masculinity and even sounded a bit refreshing.

"The elite dragon this time is a hot-blooded man... I suppose?"

"But then again, this type of description doesn't really suit a dragon."

Hal and Asya conversed, but no longer in whispers caused by Sound Suppression. Judging from the fact that the enemy could leave himself so open, it was predictable that pseudo-divinity would not work.

The enemy must have used some kind of method to defend —

"Next, it's time to see how much of an effect our trump card can make. Asya, I'm counting on you."

"Got it. Rushalka!"

Hal focused his awareness in the center of his right palm. Hence, a magic symbol surfaced there.

The Rune of the Bow, a design depicting an arrow nocked to a bow. When Hal started to think silently about entrusting this rune to Asya, the childhood friend beside him nodded instantly. Next, the Rune of the Bow also appeared on the ground beneath their feet as well as in front of Rushalka in the air.

"Attack!"

"Rushalka, Frost Breath!"

The attack that had defeated Raak Al Soth reappeared.

Conferring a massively amplified magical shot upon a vassal dragon, that was the Rune of the Bow.

Under the rune's blessing, the airborne Rushalka discharged cold air and icy breath, attempting to engulf the elite dragon target along with the explosive flames, thereby freezing them.

A storm of blue-white ice shards swirled up at the main entrance of the National Diet Building.

The explosive flames released by Akuro-Ou earlier were quickly scattered by this blizzard. The silver dragon's massive body, which he had boldly allowed the flames to burn, was once again revealed.

"Fufu... So this is the power of dragonbane? I see, it is certainly nothing simple—"

Listening to the dragon's arrogant voice, Hal's trio could not believe their eyes for a moment.

"Completely unharmed, is he...?"

"Crap. I was hoping to see how much damage the rune's attack could inflict, but..."

"Total ineffectiveness is too unexpected, right!?"

Calm and composed, standing inside the blizzard's vortex, the enemy remained completely unscathed.

Whether the cold air or the storm of ice shards, neither could cause the slightest damage to the dragon's silver scales. Pavel Galad's massive body was enveloped by a pearl-white glow.

This light was protecting the silver dragon, blocking the freezing attack from the Rune of the Bow!

"The light of indestructibility...? Meaning the trait of imperishability...?" Hal murmured blankly, vaguely understanding the magical nature of the pearly radiance.

"The dragonslaying runes are seals of imperishability. It is said that they have existed since the beginning of the universe."

Galad's whispering voice carried faint laughter.

"By deploying the rune's imperishable divinity, this body can obtain the protection of imperishable indestructibility... O successor of the dragonslaying bow, do you not know that?"

The silver dragon's eyes definitely captured Hal from afar.

Only then did Hal notice that the dragon's eyeballs were amethyst in color.

"Still, I never expected the Bow's user to actually show up."

At this point, the storm of cold air finally ceased.

However, the silver-white dragon scales remained lustrous and dazzling, with the slightest scratch on them...

"Ever since I was told that a successor was present in this island nation, I have been secretly anticipating. Perhaps there might be a chance to fight a fellow successor of dragonbane."

"You already said you're going to conquer Japan, of course I've no choice but to resist..."

Hal's murmuring was very feeble compared to Galad's shouting.

...Because he did not have any mood to enjoy a conversation. However, the dragon apparently heard him.

"Fufu. So you are challenging a dragon to protect your country? Bow's successor!"

"N-Nothing that grand. I'm just forced to take defensive action because I don't have a choice!"

Seeing that a dialogue had been established, Hal grew anxious.

Meanwhile, Pavel Galad proudly said the following.

"Since the opponent wields the power of dragonbane, I have no choice but to draw my sword. O trails of the flint star shining in the sky, trace out the secret records of Ruruk Soun!"

Galad chanted in his beautiful and highly masculine voice.

Then he extended his right hand, raising his palm high up towards the sky.

"I offer prayer to the seal in my possession, that of the Divine Sword of the Heavens. Let the dragonslaying sword come to my hand now!"

Instantly, a beautiful longsword appeared in Galad's right hand.

It was a double-edged sword with a long and thick blade. The hilt portion was very long, possible for Galad to use a two-handed grip with room to spare. Hal had seen the same weapon in the Yokohama video.

Holding the longsword, Pavel Galad rose up into the air.

"That's... the dragonslaying sword? The Rune of the Sword?"

Hal whispered in shock.

"Unlike me, he can materialize the rune—into a weapon?"

"Haruomi! You lose if you get intimidated by the enemy's weapon. At least resolve yourself to fight back and take the initiative to attack!"

Asya scolded from beside him. Experienced in battle and possessing a wild beast's instincts, she evidently realized this moment was the key to deciding the outcome.

Hal reached out with his right hand to hold his childhood friend's left hand.

At the same time, he mentally invoked the Rune of the Bow—to entrust its firepower to Asya and Rushalka.

"Rushalka, Lightning Bolt!"

The Rune of the Bow was deployed again in front of Rushalka who was on standby in the air. Immediately, the lone horn on her forehead released blue-white lightning!

Giving off the distinctive odor of ions, Rushalka's lightning devoured the gigantic silver body—

However, Pavel Galad casually swung his longsword horizontally. Just by doing that, he sliced the lightning and erased it.

He did not even use that pearly glow—imperishable protection—to defend.

"I would advise you not to underestimate me. Now that I have drawn the Sword, I can eliminate a Bow of this level without even needing to rely on protection."

From the sky, Galad looked down on the ground—Hal's location—and declared presumptuously.

The tide of the battle was already fixed by this point in time.

Seeing the light from the longsword in the silver dragon's hand, Akuro-Ou turned her face away in extreme discomfort. Speaking of which, the same had happened with Soth last time. After all, this was likewise the power of dragonbane.

Rushalka too. Her entire body was disintegrating in a gradual process of collapse—

Furthermore, though it was unclear whether unleashing the Bow twice was the reason, Rushalka seemed utterly exhausted. Glaring at Pavel Galad, her sharp gaze was also much more hollow than in the beginning.

However, the silver-white dragon said, "O user of the Bow, isn't it time for you to show your true power? No need to hold back. For the sake of racing along the Road to Kingship, I must become stronger than anyone. Only by withstanding ever fiercer strikes and slaying ever stalwart foes will I become even stronger than I am now!"

Everyone's jaw dropped in shock, whether Asya, Hal or Orihime.

"Please! For the sake of my training, strike with everything you have!"

"Even if the opponent requests that, an impossible task still remains impossible..."

The enemy in the air could not possibly have heard Orihime's murmurings.

However, perhaps smelling the subtle air between humans, Galad suddenly showed a stunned expression.

"Impossible—Did you use your full power in the earlier attacks already?"

Hal could see the color of disappointment in the dragon's eyes, gazing down on mankind from the sky.

"This... This is such a disappointment. I was expecting the imminent battle to be the first step along my path of conquest. It was only just now when I swore to absolute victory and slaughter in my heart!"

Pavel Galad was evidently very hot-blooded in personality.

"In that case, you leave me no choice. Weak enemies have ways to die as befitting weak enemies—"

Twelve runes were shining above Galad, but they did not include the Rune of the Sword.

Naturally, they were also magic symbols of Ruruk Soun. This arrangement of runes carried the dual meanings of "alchemy" and "bestowal of magical power"...

"Then I shall let my blood boil then turn the hot blood into a minion to butcher all of you. Such weak foes are not worthy of facing the dragonslaying sword that stands as the supreme blade..."

Surprisingly, Galad's voice sounded quite dismayed.

He even slumped his shoulders and showed extreme sorrow towards Hal's "state of weakness."

In the next instant, blood spilled out from his—a dragon's left arm. Surging out like from a fountain, the blood resembled mercury. The bleeding soon stopped but the great volume of blood spilled on the asphalt road began to move.

It looked like flowing slime or melted metal.

Furthermore, it was quite humongous. The plaza and road in front of the National Diet Building was covered in mercury color within the blink of an eye. Had protesters been holding a demonstration here, hundreds of people would probably drown in an instant.

"Compared to that of other dragons, *my blood is more vigorous*. This is an attempt to turn blood into a minion using magic. Living metal born from my blood as a seedbed... Will you be able to handle it!?"

"Are you sure that's what vigorous blood means!?"

While throwing out a retort, Hal felt stunned at the same time.

In a RPG situation, this would be the arrival of a monster called "Large Living Metal Slime."

Resembling the shape, motion and super high temperature of metal melting in a furnace, this liquid metal began to move. Indeed, it was extremely hot. The mercury-like fluid was giving off astounding heat and rushing towards their location like a tsunami.

In the process, various "things" were gradually swallowed by the liquid metal.

Trees lining what used to be sidewalks, the remains of street lights, abandoned cars, etc—The majority melted away. This was only natural since the temperature was similar to a furnace's after all.

Just the hot air reaching Hal's trio was already enough to make them all covered in sweat.

Swallowed by that thing, a human would probably get annihilated without anything left, not even bones!

"Since our most powerful move didn't work, there's no point in continuing the fight."

Asya suddenly yelled.

"In that case, let's flee as hard as we can! Start retreating at full speed!"

"The Thirty-Seventh Stratagem? Roger that!"

"Orihime-san, Rushalka can't hold out much longer. Please use the method I taught you to shrink Akuro-Ou so that all of us can ride her. Not only will this make her more agile but it's also easier to hide!"

"Understood. I'm counting on you, Akuro-Ou!"

Rushalka had disappeared from the sky already.

Meanwhile, Orihime closed her eyes and began to concentrate. As a result, the motionlessly hovering Akuro-Ou gradually shrank in size. Originally large enough to rival elite dragons, her massive body now turned into a fox-wolf roughly three meters long—

Witches Level 3 or above had the ability to shrink their "serpent" to a certain extent.

The miniaturized Akuro-Ou swiftly landed on the ground and knelt down. Orihime was the first to mount her back. Hal and Asya followed suit.

As soon as everyone had mounted her back, the white nine-tailed fox-wolf began to run along the ground with her four legs.

Right in the nick of time. After Akuro-Ou began to sprint, the tsunami of liquid metal reached their former position and the surrounding roads.

Even on a highway, Akuro-Ou was soon racing comfortably at high speed.

But due to a lack of safety goggles and shock dampeners, the rider experience was pretty much awful.

Intense up and down movement. The three riders clung desperately to the white fur with both hands while clamping Akuro-Ou's body between their thighs, gritting their teeth and trying not to get thrown off.

Even so, the liquid metal was still closing in from behind while moving like a tsunami!

"Akuro-Ou, fly!"

Probably realizing it was impossible to escape on the ground, Orihime issued her command.

Instantly, Akuro-Ou floated up lightly to the sky, instantly reaching a height overlooking the roofs of five and six-story multi-tenant buildings. At the same time, the riders were spared from the awfully bumpy ride.

"In any case, first fly towards Western Tokyo. Be careful and don't drop us!"

Akuro-Ou flew west as requested. However, the chase was not over.

This time, part of the liquid metal bulged out, reaching for the sky.

It had turned a portion of its body into *tentacles* in an attempt to catch the flying Akuro-Ou. Also, rather than attacking just once, these tentacles launched wave after wave of attacks at Hal's group!

Orihime could not help but direct Akuro-Ou to rise higher. The fox-wolf loyally followed orders—

At this moment, Hal felt his spine suddenly shudder once.

Because he felt a gaze. Someone was staring at him.

He looked back to see the dragon hovering motionlessly above Nagatachō. Majestically, he spread his silver-white wings and stared at Hal's fleeing group. Then Hal heard his voice:

'How saddening. A rare encounter with a fellow successor of dragonbane yet you turn tail and flee instead of rising to the challenge...'

Probably delivered directly to Hal's ear using magic, Galad's voice sounded full of sorrow.

'However, since you lack power, there is no helping it. I will bring the curtain down on this farce while fantasizing about the great and formidable foe I shall encounter next time. Farewell—'

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!

The mournful howl reverberated across the Old Tokyo sky along with these parting words. Released by Pavel Galad, this atmosphere-shaking shockwave was filled with magical power.

"Orihime-san, use pseudo-divinity to defend! The impact is coming, hurry!"

As Asya finished her warning, the surrounding air instantly shook like a heat haze.

Orihime's reaction speed was undoubtedly outstanding, but still not fast enough. Akuro-Ou was blown away like a tiny airplane in a sudden storm. Sitting on her back, the trio was thrown into the air.

Despite the shockwave surrounding them, everyone seemed to be unharmed.

The activation of Akuro-Ou's pseudo-divinity had probably protected them. However, Hal, Asya, Orihime and even Akuro-Ou were all getting blown away.

And they were flying in different directions.

Separated from the group, the shocked Hal was falling in a parabolic trajectory.

The wind was roaring noisily in his ears, striking his entire body mercilessly. Dozens of meters below, he could see the roofs of what seemed to be office buildings.

The ground was further down. However, regardless where he landed, death was certain...

Hal thought with a detached outlook.

A witch with powerful magic reserves might have a chance in surviving. However, Hal did not know any magic that would prove useful in midair. In other words, he was out of options—No wait.

While crashing to the ground, Hal remembered.

'The dragonslaying runes are seals of imperishability. By deploying the rune's imperishable divinity, this body can obtain the protection of imperishable indestructibility—'

This was what the enemy had personally taught him. In addition, Hal had learned the fact that he could not kill himself easily.

In other words... While falling, Hal imagined Galad's impervious form that he had witnessed earlier. At the same time, he thought to himself that Haruga Haruomi was supposed to achieve the same.

Hence, the Rune of the Bow manifested on his right palm while his field of vision was filled with pearly brightness—

"What kind of gag manga is this...?"

Hal surveyed his surroundings and muttered in self-deprecation.

After falling for a duration that seemed long but was actually short, Hal crashed into asphalt.

However, he was completely unharmed. For an instant, Hal experienced intense pain that felt as though his entire body was breaking apart. Right now, various parts of his body was still aching, but there were no

serious injuries at all. The asphalt road surface that had taken Hal's impact was in a far sorrier state.

Roughly eight or nine meters in diameter, a crater had formed on the road.

What created this hole was not a meteor but a human body that had crashed down like a shooting star. Confronted with this absurd situation, Hal sighed before looking around him.

Based on the road signs and urban landscape, his current position was probably in the vicinity of Yotsuya in the Shinjuku.

Hal searched the inner pocket of his denim jacket where his satellite phone was kept. He took it out for a look. Luckily, it was not damaged either.

Although he wanted to confirm the location of his crash, finding out his friends' situations took priority.

Hal first phoned Hiiragi-san at Tokyo New Town and get an update on the situation in the process—The call picked up.

"Yes. Yes. Hmm, okay, I guess... Huh? Asya's fine?"

He felt all energy draining from his body. Involuntarily, Hal almost dropped the phone to the ground.

Chapter 4 - Awakening

Part 1

Pavel Galad had issued a deadline of five days.

Akuro-Ou and Rushalka's defeat had happened on the afternoon of the third day. Despite the battle, the dragon did not break his promise. He apparently curled up and went back to sleep, continuing to stay at Nagatachō...

Not simply hot-blooded, but perhaps he was very rigid and principled in personality too.

Was the silver dragon a *hybrid* or *pure-blooded*? In his hazy mind due to a high fever, Hal pondered such utterly inane questions.

After the miraculous survival, Hal was rescued personally by Kenjou who had sneaked into Old Tokyo.

Sitting in the escape vehicle was Asya who had been rescued first. Reportedly, the childhood friend had exhibited her prowess as a Level 5 witch by performing Descent Control, magic for countering Isaac Newton's law of gravity to slow down an object's rate of fall.

"I don't think I'd stay in one piece if I had cast my magic thirty seconds later..."

In the car on the trip back to Tokyo New Town, Asya remarked in exhaustion.

Even so, she had apparently crashed into the roof of a multi-tenant building at a rate comparable to a speeding bicycle. It was only thanks to her defensive magic and guarding skills acquired from close quarters combat training that she got out with only minor scratches and bruises.

Back to New Town, Hal was dropped off at his own house. Soon after his crash landing, Hal started suffering from a thirty-eight-degree fever. As a result, he was forced to recuperate—

Then came the morning of the fourth day after the declaration. Hal opened his eyes while in his own room's bed.

"Well, you officially invoked the rune's power without using a *wand* after all. Of course there will be a backlash."

Hinokagutsuchi was whispering by his pillow. As usual, she was acting like she knew everything.

"Wand... Don't tell me you're referring to the 'magic wand' that last time's elite also used?"

"Yes. Whether you have one or not makes a huge difference in strain."

Hinokagutsuchi explained while leaning against the edge of the bed.

With her back facing Hal, who was still lying in bed, she started playing with a handheld game console. Whether hardware or software, all were Hal's possessions. She was currently killing time in a popular game, hunting monsters as a resident in a fantasy world.

"So what kind of monsters do I need to defeat in order to get the materials for that wand thing?"

"Find out on your own. That was what I did. Whether in games or in war, those who cannot look after themselves will never follow the *road* to completion."

Hinokagutsuchi was controlling a stalwart and brawny swordsman as her player character, "Hinokagutsuchi" spelled in hiragana.

He was clad in shiny black armor. The massive sword he was swinging with both hands was also a black magic sword with an ominous design. Both the weapon and the defensive gear were clearly rare items.

The self-styled devil's finger movements for controlling the character were also exceptionally experienced...

"Doing what you are taught, taking action when you are told, do you not find this kind of disposition extremely pathetic? If no one has blazed a trail beforehand, just make one yourself. It is that simple."

How unbelievable. Hinokagutsuchi was clearly just playing a video game—

Yet from the image of her back, Hal could see haughtiness and sternness forbidding all grumbling and complaints.

"Is that how you ascended to that throne of the whatever queen?"

"Hmm? This is how I conduct myself no matter what the task. I am my own lord across heaven and earth, fighting whoever offends my eyes, going wherever I please. Whenever I was worshiped, I would temporarily take on the responsibilities of a goddess. In the past, that was essentially how I spent my life of greatness."

"In the past huh..."

Hal repeated softly. Indeed, she was using past tense on purpose?

Then Hal felt it amidst his fever.

Helplessness. Emptiness. A sense of loss that he had lost count of how many dozens of times he had experienced it. Indeed. In various ways, this was an era where turmoil was everywhere, but due to his family background and occupation, this type of experience was particularly abundant for Hal.

"Was returning to Tokyo the wrong choice, just as I thought...?"

He thought back to Juujouji Orihime's covenant ritual. He should not have accepted the job after all, right?

The same thoughts would cross Hal's mind whenever witches, whose ritual he had taken part in, died in battle.

Although they had to be present on the frontlines, witches actually had a fairly high survival rate. Presumably, this was because the "serpents" were in charge of the actual fighting. Even so, deaths still occurred and were reported to staff who were acquainted with the deceased during the covenant rituals.

Had that ritual not taken place, would Orihime have lived longer?

In that case, she would not be "missing in action, chances of survival: slim" as currently categorized—

Regret and guilt surged endlessly. Hal could not even muster the strength to sigh. What surprised himself was this intense sense of loss.

Clearly, he had only known her for a month. How unbelievable.

Hal clicked his tongue at his body, listless due to the fever, while rising from the bed.

"What is the matter, brat? Are you tired of the world and wish to commit suicide?"

"Of course not. I just remembered a promise that I had made uncharacteristically."

Currently, there was no definite proof of Akuro-Ou and Orihime's deaths. Furthermore, Hal had promised to try his hardest to handle things appropriately, to use his unfamiliar power to save her.

However, Haruga Haruomi had not done anything.

Pushing Hinokagutsuchi away, Hal got off the bed with unsteady footsteps.

First, he had to infiltrate Old Tokyo and locate Orihime and Akuro-Ou's whereabouts. Should the enemy show up, then he needed to try his hardest to find clues and see if he could seize a chance to trigger his power's awakening just like how he acquired protection. In any case, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Taking action was his only recourse...

At this moment, Haruga Haruomi cocked his head and went "Hmm?" ...Because he seemed to be hearing something.

The instant he thought of Akuro-Ou, a faint cry for help reached his ears—

"Well, you and the priestess did preside over the birth ritual together. It would come as no surprise if a bond of fate were to arise between it and the officiating priests—akin to parents, hmm."

Hinokagutsuchi suddenly murmured such words, causing Hal to widen his eyes.

In that case, could it be that—

"You are planning to go the Old Tokyo wasteland!?"

"Yeah. I feel there's still a shred of hope, so I'm going," Hal told the surprised Asya.

Their location was the Metropolitan Police Department's headquarters in the Sumi East area. An area rich in the trappings of *Shitamachi*, the low-lying and traditional area of Tokyo, prior to the establishment of New Town, the north side of the Sumida Ward had been redeveloped into a modern office district.

Located at Kanegafuchi, the MPD headquarters was a twenty-story building constructed from steel-reinforced concrete.

"Haruomi, if a 'magical bond' really exists between you and Akuro-Ou, then it's indeed possible..."

"Doesn't matter either way. Let me know immediately if the situation changes. I will have *you guys* meet up before Galad launches a fierce attack."

The two of them were talking in the lounge on the seventh floor.

Asya was currently on standby for a rematch against Pavel Galad.

She was here because the Old Tokyo Concession, now turned into a battlefield, was under the MPD's jurisdiction. Ever since the return of the dragons, the trend of arming police forces had risen in many countries. Japan was no exception. The drone helicopters sent to monitor Old Tokyo also belonged to the MPD.

"If only we could fight side by side."

"I don't think there are any witches nearby who can nonchalantly ignore the wishes of their sponsors."

"Perhaps national characteristics play a role in why Japan has so few witches as strong as I am."

Speaking in a relaxed manner, the two of them were each drinking a coffee-flavored milk carton.

Whether the sudden disappearance of a well-acquainted comrade or getting stuck in a battlefield due to dragon-related incidents, all of this was commonplace. At most, what differed from the past was a noncombatant, Hal, entering the predetermined battle zone for reasons apart from investigation —

"Haruomi, I'm not going to give advice like don't overdo it. If you get caught in danger, find a way to escape from death. Only by moving forward with resolve in the face of certain death will you actually have a chance of surviving."

"Isn't this the time when you should be saying 'a real pro doesn't take risks' for the sake of mood?"

"If military experience alone was enough to overcome the situation, I could accommodate... But when magic and dragons are involved, the enemy often transcends the realm of such experiences..."

"Enemies that don't follow the manual are so annoying..."

Hal grumbled poignantly after hearing Asya's advice.

"To add to that, make sure you get the timing right when running away."

"Doesn't that contradict your advice about 'moving forward with resolve in the face of certain death' just now?"

"That's something you need to be flexible with based on feeling. Knowing the difference naturally is what makes you a full-fledged adult."

"That's why you're described as someone with instincts like a wild beast..."

While Hal held back the final statement in his mind, the childhood friend suddenly said:

"In that case, I think it's better if you took a helper along."

"A helper?"

"Yes. Go to the lobby and wait a while. I'll introduce you presently."

Hal could already guess the identity of Asya's aforementioned helper.

In any case, he went to the lobby first. Before he left, Asya said:

"If you really manage to find Orihime-san and Akuro-Ou, I will give you a hug, Haruomi. I'm serious. So no matter how much hardship lies ahead, you must find them!"

Asya, too, hoped for the survival of the Japanese girl who had suddenly become her junior. Finding a supporter, Hal could not help but smile. Then he exited the lounge.

It was currently after 8am. His fever yesterday had completely subsided.

The fever's cause was probably not some kind of flu but what Hinokagutsuchi had said.

"A magic wand huh?"

Muttering to himself, Hal took the elevator to the ground floor. As expected, there were many people in uniform. But in addition to police, there were also a few who looked like civilians.

A young girl approaching him was clearly in that category.

Just as he thought. Hal nodded. The girl in school uniform was Shirasaka Hazumi.

"I have already heard Asya-san explain the situation."

Hazumi looked haggard and her eyes were very red. She must have slept poorly.

"Why are you here, Shirasaka?"

"After hearing that Nee-sama went missing, I have been thinking all along about what I could possibly do. Although Yukari-san said I didn't need to do anything before the dragon battle, it really didn't sit well with me to stay at home... So I contacted Asya-san—"

Naturally, Orihime's family was informed of her missing in action. This included her younger cousin, Hazumi.

Feeling restless, she had come to the MPD. Hazumi had been a witch fighting on behalf of New Town for a long time now, so entering this place was probably nothing difficult.

Just as Hal figured things out, the witch in control of an injured 'serpent' said to him:

"I beg of you, please take me along! I wish to help in any manner possible!"

She expressed her will clearly, contrary to her usual air of reserved politeness.

Part 2

In fact, Hal had considered refusing Hazumi's request.

After all, it was a rare opportunity when she, a middle schooler whose personality was clearly ill-suited to be a witch, was suspended from work.

Hal believed it would be good for her to continue resting too. However, common logic would dictate that having a witch to accompany him was something to be glad about—

In the end, Hal still departed with Hazumi. After securing necessary equipment from the used bookstore at Higashikomagata, which also

doubled as a SAURU branch, they crossed the Sumida River to enter Old Tokyo through the Asakusa Bridge.

"Umm, Haruga-san, I believe you are a first-year high school student like Nee-sama... Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"U-Umm, in that case, what about your driver's license?"

Sitting in the front passenger seat, Hazumi questioned acutely.

In contrast to his underclassman who was in school uniform, seated in the driver's seat was Hal in casual clothing, dressed innocuously in a hooded parka. Although he possessed a "license," it would be far too careless to grip a steering wheel while wearing the school-prescribed uniform.

Apart from that, he was driving a four-wheel drive wagon, the one that Kenjou was using the previous day.

"Well, SAURU members receive lots of technical training."

Let alone training, Hal had not even taken any driving course at all. However, he was merely paying lip service.

Hazumi seemed to accept his explanation. Glancing sideways at his nodding companion, Hal thought poignantly to himself: Someone who grew up normally would definitely put in a snide comment about this issue.

Orihime had thrown many a disapproving comment last time.

Recalling the missing girl, Hal felt a bit unsettled.

"By the way, I think you probably understand. Although I said something about hearing Akuro-Ou's 'voice,' it's hard to say whether it's real or not. I'd advise you not to be too optimistic."

"Y-Yes. About that... I am pretty much prepared."

Hal had laid down a defensive line against the worst-case scenario. This was essential for both himself and Hazumi. However, the girl with the angelic appearance contemplated for a while then said, "It is just that whenever I feel depressed about Nee-sama's situation, Minadzuki, who is sleeping in my heart, seems to want to wake up. I get the feeling that she is telling me 'Nee-sama is still alive.'"

"Your 'serpent'?"

"Yes. I wish to say that Minadzuki could very well be sensing the same thing as you, Haruga-san."

"...I see."

Supposing this was a revelation brought by a witch's spiritual senses rather than a girl's sentimentality and optimism...

Then perhaps there was no reason to reject it. Just as Hal plunged into deep thought...

"If priestesses are blood-related, then their serpents can sense each other's bonds between souls. This is nothing uncommon."

Hearing this comment delivered with a tone of arrogance, Hazumi exclaimed "Eh?" in surprise. Unfazed, Hal simply stopped the car.

The vehicle just happened to reach a Yasukuni Street intersection in Iwamotomachi.

Without them noticing, Hinokagutsuchi had appeared in the car's back seat. She was currently staring curiously at a remote-controlled unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) for taking pictures from the sky. In other words, a reconnaissance helicopter. It was fitted with a video camera and GPS.

Capable of filming and scouting dangerous areas, it was one piece of equipment Hal had loaded onto the car.

Hinokagutsuchi had been playing with it the whole time ever since she materialized without anyone knowing.

"Seeing as it can be sensed by a serpent, just use magic to search. Isn't that much simpler?"

"M-My apologies, I am not too skilled in magic..."

In response to what Hinokagutsuchi suggested from the back seat, Hazumi hung her head gloomily, sitting in the front passenger seat.

Hal had heard that Shirasaka Hazumi was a Level 2 witch. In fact, this level was the most standard among witches across the world. Hazumi was not as incompetent as she had claimed. It was possible that her use of the words "not too skilled" stemmed from her own mindset that she did not deal well with magic.

Because so-called magic was knowledge belonging to darkness, not light. Meanwhile, Hinokagutsuchi frowned.

"Contemporary priestesses are still so poorly trained. To think that magic of this level is beyond you."

"M-My apologies, I did not study hard enough. I am terribly sorry..."

"My goodness. A halfwit of your likes would never have made it as a priestess serving in my holy precinct, not even as an apprentice."

"P-Please accept my sincere apologies—Oh."

Hazumi huddled her slender body, looking very ashamed. However, she suddenly realized something.

"Umm.. I heard about this some time ago. Last time, Nee-sama made a deal with you, Hinokagutsuchi-san, asking you to bring about Akuro-Ou's birth using magic."

"Yes. Indeed that is correct."

"Then may I make the same request to you?"

"What?"

"I will fulfill all of your demands, Hinokagutsuchi-san, so please, teach me the magic for finding Nee-sama!"

Hazumi finished with a very serious look on her face. Hinokagutsuchi smiled and went "Oh..."

"Now that is what I call spine. Little lady, answer my questions."

"Y-Yes."

"Why do you wish to negotiate a deal with me? Have you not thought about kneeling before me to request instruction?"

Despite the smile of the self-styled devil's face, it evidently did not stem from delight.

The smile was brimming with a queen's haughtiness and nobility. It seemed to convey her intention to personally test the impertinent petitioner, to pass down punishment in the event of an unsatisfactory answer—

"U-Umm, I simply feel that you might not dislike something of this sort, Hinokagutsuchi-san. There's no special meaning. I am sorry..."

"Oh, so it is simply a feeling. Is that how you perceive my temperament?"

"Y-Yes. I have heard Nee-sama talk about you and there is also how you are reluctant to tell Haruga-san about the rune, so I guessed on my own..."

"Ha! You are not only humble and honest but also perceptive and resourceful."

Faced with the huddled Hazumi, Hinokagutsuchi laughed briefly.

"Very well, I am not opposed to having you as a priestess serving by my side. Little lady, I accept your deal. Be that as it may, do not misunderstand."

"W-What are you referring to?"

"As a queen, I shall not extract compensation simply for teaching an insignificant little spell. Should an opportunity arise in the future, I shall pay the rightful price in exchange for your obedience. Wait patiently."

"Yes."

While Hinokagutsuchi was listening contentedly to Hazumi's honest reply, Hal spoke up:

"Hey, don't anything weird to this girl."

"H-Haruga-san..."

"Unlike Asya and me, this girl has a good upbringing and probably isn't as strong as Juujouji."

"Yet conversely, her personality is very docile and she has a good head on her shoulders. Listen carefully, brat. There are occasions when I wish to be flattered by an adorable and considerate girl, thereby deriving brief consolation!"

"Even if you emphasize that..."

"Handling an arrogant brat like you who keeps talking back has made my personality sinister lately."

"You are a sinister person to begin with. That should be indisputable, right?"

Just as Hal warned against the girl who called herself the devil, Hazumi smiled faintly at him.

Compared to insincere words of thanks, this better conveyed her feelings of gratitude. Hal felt extremely embarrassed and could not help

but look away. At this moment, Hinokagutsuchi opened the door and exited the vehicle.

Hal and Hazumi exchanged nods and followed her.

"Summon your serpent, little lady."

Standing at a crossroad in the former Chiyoda ward's Iwamotomachi, Hinokagutsuchi crossed her arms and commanded.

Hazumi nodded then closed her eyes, presumably to focus her mind.

"Minadzuki... Respond to my voice."

After Hazumi murmured softly, a glowing pentagram immediately appeared over her head.

This star instantly turned into an infinity symbol, transforming into a long and stout serpentine dragon emerald in color.

It was Minadzuki. Its body, long like a snake's, slithered and twisted in the air. The lizard-like head featured antlers while the leviathan flew in the sky as though swimming. Of the four limbs, the right arm alone was roughly twice the size of the others.

Sharp as swords, the four claws on her right hand served as her horn counterpart.

However, the massive body was shrouded in a red mist. Marking her entire body were countless tiny wounds where blood seeped out to produce a mist of blood.

"She's really injured all over..."

"Draw out that thing's divine power and release it in this city. This magic is nothing noteworthy, so using a bit of divine power is fine. During this time, also think about the person you wish to see."

Hal was surprised to see Minadzuki's tragic state. On the other hand, Hinokagutsuchi started giving instructions.

Meanwhile, Hazumi looked up at her partner with unease.

"I-I will try, but I am not good at controlling Minadzuki to do my every bidding. It is always a struggle when asking her to fight, so I apologize if I fail..."

While attempting the task, Hazumi apologized with a heavy conscience.

Hal began to worry. In order to control a "serpent" skillfully, a witch needed the arrogance of self-confidence bordering on shamelessness without considering the possibility of failure at all. In Hazumi's case, her reserved personality and lack of confidence were probably reinforcing each other in a vicious cycle.

Should he advise her to act less nice? Just as Hal was agonizing over this decision...

"Neither control nor fighting is necessary here. Transmit your feelings directly."

Hinokagutsuchi explained simply.

"The 'serpent' you employ is an 'imitation deity' after all. But it is still listed under the lineage of the gods despite being considered a fake. Tracing back to the root, its noble spirit towers above mankind."

"Noble...?"

"Yet you humans 'control' them and force them to 'fight,' such excessive arrogance. Go and pray, little lady. It is enough for you to transmit your wish with humility, piety, sincerity and total dedication of your mind and body. Next, it will respond to you on its own."

"Y-Yes."

Hazumi closed her eyes again and clasped her hands together in front of her developing bosom.

"Please, Minadzuki. If Nee-sama is somewhere in this city, tell me...!"

As she finished whispering like a prayer, a gust of wind blew.

A gentle breeze, it felt comfortable brushing against one's skin. The source of the wind was the gigantic emerald body hovering in the sky.

Minadzuki was apparently a leviathan bearing the pseudo-divinity of Wind.

Having received a dragonslaying rune's blessing, Hal could feel the investigative magic in the breeze.

"To think such an insecure girl could succeed..."

"This is the only way for one who lives in the light as her. However—"

Answering Hal's muttering, the former dragon queen looked up at Minadzuki in the sky.

"That sort of girl has been paired with a 'serpent' born from the seedbed of darkness after all. It is truly impossible to expect great accomplishments from her. The guidance just now was just a petty trick to muddle past the issue."

Hazumi opened her eyes and reported the result with happiness on her face from the bottom of her heart.

With Hal's location as the center, Minadzuki's wind was gradually spreading out like a wave. Then before long, Hazumi's desire to locate her cousin had spread throughout the entire Old Tokyo Concession. As a result, the magic in the breeze seemed to stimulate the caster's spiritual senses.

"I think... it should be that direction."

Inside the car traveling along Yasukuni Road, Hazumi pointed towards Shinjuku with her index finger.

It was like a compass needle pointing accurately at north.

"Just now, Minadzuki's wind 'felt' Nee-sama's Akuro-Ou somewhere ahead — That is what I think. It should be right."

"You are very confident this time..."

"Yes, because Minadzuki helped."

As soon as Hal commented from the driver's seat, sitting beside him, Hazumi immediately expressed her trust in her partner from beside him.

Meanwhile, Hal could see from the rear-view mirror that Hinokagutsuchi was playing with a dangerous tool.

"Stop playing with that, even though the ammunition's not loaded."

"So you have prepared a weapon, brat. To be honest, I am quite surprised."

"A weapon...? Ehhhh!?"

Hazumi looked back and jumped in fright. Hinokagutsuchi was examining a handgun closely.

Instead of the revolver that Hal had carried before, this was a 9mm semi-automatic pistol, superior in both stopping power and ammunition capacity.

It was one of the items Hal had taken from the used bookstore earlier.

"That's not mine but something from SAURU's New Town branch. Although it won't work on dragons, at least it can serve as a bit of self-defense..."

Hal explained himself as though in response to Hazumi's massive surprise.

"By defense, what exactly do you defend yourself against!?"

"Although Old Tokyo is quite safe, concession territories across the world are still quite dangerous places. They've become home to wild

animals or pets and livestock that has gone feral. There are even places where such animals have turned into magic beasts. With supernatural phenomena of a magical nature occurring frequently, those are genuinely danger zones."

"W-Why does that happen?"

"It seems like it's due to the massive activation of magical power in the vicinity of these concession territories. Old Manhattan and Old Warsaw are very good examples... No one can guarantee that Tokyo won't end up like that in the future, right? Shouldn't we be worrying about this type of danger?"

Hal was asking the self-styled devil seated in the back.

Hinokagutsuchi brushed him off with a smile then returned the gun to its proper location—The waist pouch where Hal kept his work equipment. This bag was made in America and included a holster inside for concealing a handgun.

The time was just past noon. If they found Orihime just like that, this rescue mission would have proceeded more smoothly than one could hope for.

In fact, Hal's prediction was as such: They would start in the vicinity of Nagatachō where the battle had taken place the day before, use investigative magic and the equipment they had brought to start a search, frequently clicking their tongues in frustration from a lack of results, thus leading into the night, finally abandoning the search to welcome the arrival of the following day.

But while driving the car, Hal was aware that "hope" had increased in his heart.

Arriving near the west entrance of Shinjuku Station, Hazumi spoke up.

"Excuse me, could you drive over to that side...!?"

She requested an amendment to the route. Her tone sounded a bit excited. Perhaps the destination was near.

The car headed in the direction Hazumi indicated. Passing in front of the no longer bustling train station, they came to the area that used to be known as the heart of Shinjuku.

There were countless high-rise buildings in modern style, laid out in organized rows.

Old Tokyo's city hall was also in the neighborhood. After looking at the state of a certain building, Hal sighed—Good fortune was in short supply.

From the front passenger seat, Hazumi gasped, seemingly in pain.

A thirty-story building adjacent to Koushuu Route. A viscous mercury-colored liquid metal was colliding with this building like a tsunami.

This living metal was like steel that had melted into liquid form inside a furnace.

It was Pavel Galad's minion—the Large Living Metal Slime. As before, it continued to radiate intense heat. Simply being nearby was making one sweat profusely.

Unbelievably, the surroundings of the targeted building was slowly shimmering like a *heat haze*.

The living metal seemed unable to touch the building due to this fluttering air.

Deflected by the heat haze barrier, the tsunami of liquid metal suddenly broke apart and scattered.

However, the remains relentlessly gathered together again after turning into fragmentary waves, smashing itself towards the building again. Even after getting scattered, it still repeated the same action stupidly...

"You said Minadzuki sensed Juujouji's location, which turns out to be—"

"Yes. It is inside there..."

Hazumi's finger pointed clearly at the building and the mercury-colored liquid metal.

Part 3

"Although I'm surviving by the skin of my teeth... This is virtually like defending a besieged castle, right?"

Orihime reacted uncharacteristically. Namely, she sighed.

Her current location was the entrance lobby of a high-rise building in west Shinjuku.

This was actually a ruin without any lighting except for sunlight streaming in from outside.

Starting yesterday, a bizarre siege battle had been taking place outside the building. A showdown between the liquid metal tsunami that was trying to invade the building versus the heat haze barrier blocking it—

The heat haze barrier was created by Akuro-Ou using the pseudo-divinity of Fire.

Thanks to that, the enemy's invasion was halted and the molten metal's high temperature did not enter the building. Defenses were impregnable for the time being.

"It's very safe right now but I have no idea whether it will be the same three hours later."

Orihime sighed again. Everyone knew she was an optimist whose favorite catchphrase was "I'll know when I get to it, no need to hesitate, just do it." But the current circumstances were too harsh.

When struck down in the air yesterday, Orihime was too shocked, halting her thinking temporarily.

However, her partner flew desperately after Orihime, catching up to carry Orihime on her back, succeeding to land at least. Then from there, they began to run. Nothing less expected from the Akuro-Ou whom the former dragon, Hinokagutsuchi, had praised as "amazing."

Nevertheless, Akuro-Ou's mobility was decreased due to injuries from the shockwave, making it difficult to fight.

Flying at high altitude might make them a target for another shockwave attack. Left without a choice, Orihime had to order Akuro-Ou to fly low. But they were finally cornered in Shinjuku, so they had to take refuge in this building.

Then invoking pseudo-divinity to deploy a barrier, they set up the only obstacle.

"Next, it's a matter of whether my stamina will last until help arrives..."

Exhausted, Orihime leaned back against Akuro-Ou's belly and whispered.

She no longer had the strength to stand. Her entire body felt lethargic and powerless. Her mind was spacing out. Even sustaining the physical body of the "serpent" would continuously consume a witch's power, resulting in symptoms akin to anemia.

Meanwhile, the white fox-wolf cuddled against Orihime, waiting on standby in a crouching position.

Since the previous day, she had maintained her shrunken size. After turning into a three-meter body, the fox-wolf's belly and fur served perfectly as bedding.

"I'll be taking a quick nap, Akuro-Ou, so don't disappear. Stay by my side and protect me.

After hearing her partner bark like a dog in response, Orihime closed her eyes, reassured.

Keeping a "serpent" continuously materialized would cause a constant drain on stamina even during sleep. She had already experienced that last night. But if Akuro-Ou were to disappear, the barrier would go away as well. Hence, there was no other choice.

But Orihime had no idea whether anyone would come rescue her even if she waited like this.

The satellite phone she had taken in advance could not connect anywhere, probably due to the barrier or because she was indoors. Either way, Orihime was unable to contact the outside world.

What had happened to Hal and Asya who had fallen off at the same time?

Common logic would dictate that they could not have survived. However, both of them possessed special skills and magic, which lent some hope to her, but dark thoughts still reared their ugly heads.

Her friends had lost their lives, rescue was not coming, Juujouji Orihime was approaching death all alone like this... Thoughts of this sort. She felt very afraid.

For the first time, Orihime was experiencing stress and fear.

Her only consolation consisted of drowsiness and fatigue that prevented her from staying awake. Exhausted, Orihime closed her eyes while praying that she would wake up in safety.

"This building is protected by Fire pseudo-divinity..."

The mercury-colored slime smashed itself into pieces against the heat haze barrier repeatedly, but each time, it reformed itself into a tsunami to challenge the heat haze—Hal watched this repeating scenario while speaking quietly.

He had gotten off the car with Hazumi.

Due to the heat given off by the living molten metal, this place was as hot as a steel mill.

"If Akuro-Ou has been using magic continuously since yesterday—I am very worried about Nee-sama!"

Hazumi cried out uncharacteristically. Hal nodded.

"Even without doing anything strenuous like fighting, she has been sustaining a 'serpent' for almost a day after all... Her body and mind must be reaching a limit? In that case, there's only one choice."

"What is it, Haruga-san?"

"Summon Minadzuki and swiftly defeat that slimy thing."

Hazumi jumped in surprise at Hal's suggestion.

"However, that elite dragon only seemed to summon his minion at a critical moment, so don't be too surprised if that thing is harder to handle than a Raptor. Considering Minadzuki's injuries, I think it's best to decide the battle instantly."

"Instantly..."

"If the enemy counterattacks even a little, I don't think Minadzuki can withstand at all, right?"

Like breaking waves, the living metal attacked the heat haze barrier again and again.

It did not do anything else and showed no signs of attacking Hal and other humans. However, if Minadzuki, a leviathan, appeared, the situation might change.

"What do you think? Do you have any confidence of success?"

"Sorry—None at all..."

When Hal asked to confirm, Hazumi lowered her eyes.

"I really am not good at asking a 'serpent' to attack... Even when I beg her to 'defeat that dragon,' Minadzuki always moves very slowly. I'm barely able to defeat small dragons slowly, but—"

Hazumi spoke timidly, never looking up the whole time.

"H-However, I will try my best. This is for rescuing Nee-sama..."

Speaking of which, Hal's first glimpse of Minadzuki was in combat. Hal recalled the battle back then.

Now that he thought back to it, she had to expend a great deal of effort just to eliminate a single Raptor. If Akuro-Ou were there instead, she would have killed it instantly with a single attack, fast as lightning.

"Recall what I said previously. There is no need to fight."

Hinokagutsuchi alighted the vehicle.

"All you need to do is transmit your prayer. Leave the 'serpent' to decide on its own how to best bring your wish to fruition. She will come up with better methods than you in your inexperience."

"No way... But—"

"You do not need confidence. Do you not understand what I said?"

"Oh..."

Comprehension surfaced in Hazumi's eyes. Looking up stiffly, she stared at the building.

Then she blinked and took a deep breath. Her facial expression, conveying worry about the person she held dear, immediately switched to a slightly tense countenance. Finally, she said to Hal:

"A-Although I have no confidence, I have decided to believe. Haruga-san, please step back."

Seeing Hazumi acting a little different from usual, Hal felt surprised.

Distancing himself from the girl whose personality was supposed to be reserved and polite, he came over to Hinokagutsuchi.

(...What a friendly teacher act you're putting on. How unlike you.)

(I made a deal—or rather, am going to make one—after all. Naturally, I will look after her as appropriate.)

(But all you did was give brief advice? How can things proceed that smoothly...)

Paying no attention to the pair who were neither benevolent nor honest, Hazumi finally began.

"Minadzuki, respond to my voice."

Her summoning voice sounded more forceful.

The emerald serpentine dragon suddenly manifested over Hazumi's head in response to her call, taking position behind the metal slime. A bloody mist floated around Minadazuki, dyeing the air red.

Slosh! Ripples appeared on the liquid metal.

It seemed to be entering a state of alert upon sensing the arrival of an enemy.

"I hope you can save Nee-sama. If you need my power for this... Take as much as you need—!"

Hazumi was not like Asya who controlled her "serpent" using mighty willpower and fighting spirit.

Instead, she clasped her hands before her chest in prayer, closing her eyes.

This meant she could not watch the battle situation or issue orders, which was equivalent to giving up on fighting. But conversely, it also meant that she had resolved to entrust her life to Minadzuki's judgment—

"I don't have the confidence to command you with finesse, but I am able to place my trust in you... So I am counting on you!"

The liquid metal began to move like a tsunami as it did yesterday.

It rushed towards Minadzuki behind it, trying to swallow her whole. In response, the extensively injured leviathan howled "Kyuahhhh!"

At the same time, Minadzuki released ultrasonic waves from her mouth.

Invoking the pseudo-divinity of Wind, she caused the atmosphere to vibrate. This pulse of air easily blew away the liquid metal.

"Fortunately, that silvery brat is absent."

Seeing Minadzuki obtain victory, Hinokagutsuchi commented patronizingly.

"Were that guy present, he would employ dragonslaying skills to confer his minion with the power of the Sword. With that, the battle would not have been won so easily."

"This world is way too easy..."

Meanwhile, Hal felt a bit anticlimactic. However, the self-styled devil disagreed defiantly:

"Are you referring to the fact that I simply gave tiny hints? Foolish fellow. There is no need to waste a thousand words to teach mere tricks of the unorthodoxy."

Hinokagutsuchi puffed out her prepubescent chest and asserted solemnly.

"That magic just now was finally brought out by that little lady on her own when cornered without options, after exhausting both her body and mind. That is precisely why it could be used with such ease and naturalness. A thousand words would prevent her from learning the trick. All she needed was a single sentence profound enough to enlighten her."

"I see..."

"I will have you know that my greatness as a master is amazing."

"Well, that might be true this one time..."

Just as Hal revised his opinion of the smug Hinokagutsuchi for the first time, Minadzuki cried shrilly.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooommmm—

Her voice sounded like a call to a faraway companion. At this moment, the heat haze barrier guarding the building suddenly vanished, because Minadzuki had conveyed a message of safety to her kin.

Then the faint red mist in the air around the hovering Minadzuki grew more and more dense—

The bleeding had likely increased due to the strain from using pseudo-divinity persistently. Hazumi frantically cried out:

"Thank you, Minadzuki! It's okay now, you can rest!"

The emerald serpentine dragon of a leviathan gradually vanished.

Meanwhile, Hal entered the building. The damage near the entrance was very severe. Most likely, a giant creature—Akuro-Ou—had broken through by force.

As expected, the white fox-wolf was dutifully *crouching* at the entrance lobby on standby.

Dressed in uniform, Orihime was sleeping, treating Akuro-Ou's belly and white fur as bedding.

Due to the excellent quality of Akuro-Ou's fur, she seemed to be sleeping quite comfortably. After lowering the sleeping Orihime to the ground, the "serpent" disappeared by her own will, having accomplished her mission. It was possible that she was worried about the strain on Orihime.

"H-Haruga-kun...?"

Hal caught a rare glimpse of Orihime's dazed face as she woke up.

It was presumably due to her just waking up combined with the her massive exhaustion of stamina. Hal nodded at her.

"Thanks to Akuro-Ou and Shirasaka's efforts, I was able to rescue you."

"Hazumi came too...? I-I must thank her. But can I ask a question...?"

Orihime gazed in Hal blankly then complained.

"We clearly made a promise, but aren't you arriving way too late this time...?"

"Sorry. After all, I'm still new at this, so getting the timing right is hard."

"You leave me speechless... Next time, I will lend you the 'Heroes of Justice Reference Collection' I made in my childhood, so study that well..."

"It's getting easier and easier to imagine what kind of childhood you had..."

"But this time really was awful."

While Hal was feeling impressed, Orihime sighed in exhaustion.

"For the first time in my life, I thought I might die..."

"This is actually quite common in this world. Even without participating in battle, I've come close to dying many times. It's fine once you get used to it—But whether you can think of things that way varies between individuals."

Hal tried his best to speak casually as usual.

"Juujouji, you probably belong on the side that's fine."

"I don't really want to accumulate this type of experience... By the way, would it kill you at all to say a few considerate words to a novice like me?"

Orihime made a sulking expression but the corners of her lips were smiling.

"Nevertheless, I am really glad to see you in good spirits as usual, Haruga-kun. After all, it would be too lame if we were wiped out like that yesterday. As for Asya-san—"

"If I survived, how could she possibly die?"

"Indeed, one does get a very resilient impression from Asya-san... But if that is the case, I really feel reassured for now. I am so tired, may I sleep?"

"Yeah. Once we leave this place, you can sleep as much as you want."

Lending Orihime his shoulder for support, Hal brought her outside. Feeling her body's seductive warmth through the school uniform, Hal began to blush.

Noticing his reaction, Orihime whispered "pervert..."

Despite the embarrassment and turning red to his ears, Hal also felt relieved.

Despite experiencing a situation of life and death, Orihime did not seem to have suffered much mental trauma. Was it due to her inborn personality of boldness and having Akuro-Ou's protection by her side that she could dispel her fear?

"How are you, Nee-sama!? But thank goodness you are safe!"

Presumably feeling relieved, Hazumi was rushing over with tears in her eyes. Together with Hal, she supported Orihime. At this moment, a giant shadow blotted out the sunlight.

Hal looked up reflexively at the sunny sky and gasped.

Pavel Galad was spreading his silver-white wings, descending from the sky.

Part 4

"I sensed the demise of my minion and came to have a look—So it was you."

Landing on the ground, Galad spoke in his usual beautiful voice.

"However, I am sorry to say that I have already lost interest in you. Even if we stare at each other like this, I cannot muster the slightest shred of fighting spirit."

"I don't want to fight you either..."

Hal was having a conversation with a dragon for the first time in his life.

While engaging Soth in combat, he never tried to communicate actively. This was only natural. Dragonkind and Haruga Haruomi belonged to totally different worlds.

"Is that so? Then I shall show mercy by erasing you instantly."

"I'd be very grateful if you could quietly let us go."

"Is that meant to be joke? I am sorry to say that I am a dragon lacking in the talent known as 'humor,' so a splendid reply truly eludes me—Then regarding the manner of your death, would you prefer fire or lightning?"

"Forget about no talent, you're showing a lot of promise in playing the fool..."

Hal tried his best to run his mouth off while maintaining his "usual attitude."

However, his throat was very parched due to excessive tension. His heart was also beating rapidly. But right now, Hal was gradually changing his perspective. Despite his reluctance, he had to admit that

the world he inhabited was rapidly changing. If he insisted on surviving this moment, he must first alter his mindset thoroughly.

Otherwise, even the two other people present would get swept into a journey to death—

Hal entrusted Orihime's powerless body to Hazumi while motioning with his eyes for them to retreat.

Although the two girls watched him in worry, Hazumi still tried her hardest to support her stumbling cousin Orihime while leaving.

The two of them were unable to use "serpents" right now. They were probably worried they would be a liability for Hal.

"If you do not have any special requests, then I will choose on your behalf."

"You can choose whatever you want, but I've no intention of accepting quietly..."

Hal and Pavel Galad were separated by a distance of ten-odd meters.

Just as he looked up to gaze at the dragon's gigantic body, the enemy opened his jaws wide. A blue-white fire source could be seen lighting up in his mouth. The hot-blooded dragon had apparently chosen to use fire for the finishing blow.

Hal took a deep breath and thought back to the survival drama last time.

Obtaining imperishable protection by imagining himself to be an indestructible adversary.

"Farewell, successor of the Bow!"

"Screw that! How could I let you kill me so easily!?"

Hal extended his right palm forward with the Rune of the Bow surfacing on it.

A pearly glow enveloped his entire body. From above this light, Galad spewed out blue-white flames. Only after releasing blistering flames for a minute or two, he finally closed his mouth—

But when the flames ended, Hal had not been burned at all.

"Oh... You have learned imperishable protection in merely a day."

Seeing Hal unharmed, Galad narrowed his eyes.

"Then I have no choice but to draw this."

The silver-white arm reached high towards the sky. It was the right hand whose palm was showing the Rune of the Sword.

Galad intended to use his trump card! Hal stared wide-eyed. In that case, he intended to imitate all the way. If the enemy deployed protection, he would deploy protection too. If the enemy summoned his magic wand, he would summon a magic wand too—

Hal watched Galad intently and tried to emulate the whole process, to subject his opponent to the same move.

"O trails of the flint star shining in the sky, trace out the secret records of Ruruk Soun."

The instant he activate magical sight, Hal saw.

Macrocosmic darkness was hanging around Pavel Galad's surroundings. An uncountable number of stars were twinkling in the distant far beyond, forming an ocean of stars!

"I offer prayer to the seal in my possession, that of the Divine Sword of the Heavens. Let the dragonslaying sword come to my hand now!"

The instant Galad called out, a group of stars over his head became more dazzling.

This was constellation known to Hal and other humans as Orion. Among them, three stars in a series—the three stars symbolizing the hunter Orion's belt—gave off platinum-colored radiance.

Then a beautiful longsword appeared in Galad's right hand.

A rune consisting of three Vs descended upon this sword. The Rune of the Sword. The rune came from over Galad's head—The Three Stars of Orion.

The instant the sword merged with the rune, Galad's longsword radiated platinum-colored light!

"Is that how that guy's sword, his magic wand, is created!?"

"Hmph. The dragonslaying sword versus imperishable protection, allow me to test which is more potent!"

Galad swung the dragonslaying sword down.

Hal blocked using the power of protection. The instant the gigantic sword's blade struck the pearly radiance, the center of the glow shook from the astounding impact. Hal lost balance and fell to his knees.

However, the pearly radiance displayed excellent defensive power. Hal remained unharmed—

"Haruga-san...!" "Are you alright!?"

Orihime and Hazumi cried out from somewhere but Hal could not see them.

Hal was unsure whether it was due to magical sight but even his own surroundings had turned into the universe. Even though he was standing firmly on the ground, what lay underfoot was a macrocosmic abyss.

Currently, this universe only contained two surviving existences, Hal and Pavel Galad.

"Fufufu! As one would expect, crushing imperishable protection is not that easy!"

Was it the instinct of dragons to delight in the enemy's strength?

Galad swung the dragonslaying sword again. This time, it was a diagonal thrust downwards.

The instant he blocked the attack, Hal felt a powerful impact again but he was not injured. Next, Galad chopped straight, sliced sideways, then slashed as though swinging a golf club.

Every time it was struck, the pearly protection would shake intensely.

Hal's body would shake accordingly, but he did not suffer harm at least. The protection's power was truly an inviolable barrier of defense—Logically speaking, that was the way it should be, but symptoms began to appear.

Every time the shaking happened, Hal would feel pain in his heart as though getting pricked by needles.

"Urgh...!"

Hal groaned. It looked like he could not rely too much on the protection's defensive power.

Suffering blows at this rate, his heart was going to explode sooner or later—Hal felt his mind invaded by terrifying certainty. I want a wand. I need a magic wand after all!

"If the Rune of the Sword is Orion, then what constellation is the Rune of the Bow...?"

Stars. Speaking of which, didn't Hinokagutsuchi mention it before?

"Bow Star—of the Southern Sky!"

The instant he chanted this name, a group of stars over Hal's head became more dazzling.

Among them, Sirius was without a doubt particularly striking in brightness. It was said that Sirius A in the Canis Majoris constellation was the brightest amongst all stars. Was that the Bow Star of the Southern Sky? ...No.

Diagonally down from it, at the tip of Canis Majoris, *an arched bow* could be seen.

More precisely, there was a series of stars resembling a bow. That constellation was precisely the Bow Star of the Southern Sky!

At the same as when he realized that, a magic symbol descended from the bow constellation. It was a runic symbol that seemed to embody a "tilted half moon" as a pictogram, the Rune of the Bow.

Next, all he needed to do was find a "bow" for it to inhabit—

Hal instantly reached his right hand into the waist pouch behind his back.

Then pulling the zipper open, he gripped the heavy sensation of steel. It was the pistol that Hinokagutsuchi had been playing with earlier. Hal pulled the gun out of its holster.

"Oh...?"

Hearing a whisper from the self-styled devil from somewhere, Hal saw it.

After receiving the Rune of the Bow that had descended from the heavens, the gun shone with platinum radiance.

He raised the glowing gun with one hand. In fact, this gun was not loaded—but filled with confidence, he pulled the trigger.

BANG! Accompanied by a loud noise, the recoil was transmitted to his arm instantly.

The gun shining with sacred platinum light ejected an empty shell that was not supposed to exist in the first place.

Instantly, Hal switched from magical sight to ordinary vision, returning from the starry macrocosm to the Shinjuku wasteland—

He did not know if the previous scene was the reason, but the surroundings were filled with astoundingly concentrated magical power.

Dressed in their school uniforms, Orihime and Hazumi were watching him with tearful expressions. Hinokagutsuchi was not visible, apparently hidden.

Standing sternly like an intimidating guardian statue, the silver-white dragon was enveloped in pearly light.

He had deployed imperishable protection to guard himself. While praising "Wow...", he gazed down at Hal—More precisely, he was looking at the steel-colored gun held in Hal's right hand.

It was the weapon that had attacked Galad by firing bullets together with dragonslaying magical power.

"You have materialized a dragonslaying rune into a 'wand'!"

"I finally succeeded by using your method as reference..."

The gun in Hal's hand was the color of dull steel as before.

However, its appearance was giving a different impression now. Its basic shape remained as the 9mm semi-automatic pistol but flowing golden lines had been added in certain places as decoration, adding an element of solemn elegance to this vulgar tool of violence.

A tiny Rune of the Bow was inscribed on the gun's grip in golden lines.

Solid and elegant, rugged yet magnificent—

This was a "magic wand," a handgun capable of shooting even dragons to death with ease. What an absurd object. While muttering mentally, Hal did not forget to pull the trigger.

And it was four times in succession. Four bullets glowing with red light were fired, all infused with the power of dragonbane.

If struck in a vital, even an elite dragon would die easily. One would expect them to defend desperately using the runes of Ruruk Soun.

However, Galad simply swung the dragonslaying sword.

Just by doing that, pearly radiance enveloped the dragon's gigantic body. The dragonslaying gunshots were all deflected by the light, but did not fail completely in causing damage.

"Gah...!"

This time it was Galad's turn to groan, clutching his chest with his unoccupied left hand.

That was precisely the location of a dragon's heart—on top of the heartmetal. Like Hal just now, his heart, or equivalently, his heartmetal, must have felt a sharp pain.

"Hoo—So defense alone is not enough!?"

Then Galad swung the dragonslaying sword with lightning speed.

In that instant, Hal guarded his head using his gun, deploying pearly light immediately.

Imperishable protection once again guarded Hal from the sword's strike. However, Galad did not stop there. Swinging the dragonslaying sword nonstop, he attacked again and again.

One slash, two slashes, three slashes. The flurry of attacks did not pause.

With every impact, Hal's heart would suffer sharp pain. It felt almost suffocating.

If this pain were to persist for two or three minutes, Hal feared his heart would rupture and result in his death. Hal gritted his teeth and stared at the gun in his hand.

"If possible... Increase the firepower a bit!"

In the next instant, mechanical action could be heard. It came from the interior of the gun— Was it responding to my thoughts!?

Hal endured the pain and pointed the gun's muzzle at Galad. Then he pulled the trigger only once.

As a result, three red glowing bullets were fired consecutively. A triple burst— The magic wand had switched to burst mode to fire thrice per trigger pull. These three shots sent Galad flying.

The silver dragon's massive body landed on its back.

However, the attack did not succeed in breaching the protection. The enemy remained unharmed too. Galad swiftly got up and raised the dragonslaying sword again.

Equally ready to fight, Hal pointed the muzzle at Galad.

With imperishable protection deployed, the two of them glared at each other for dozens of seconds continuously.

"I see now. Defeating a dragonslayer requires a more powerful sword..."

"So I guess it's better if I fire multiple bursts each time...?"

Dragon and human, the two living beings of different species spoke simultaneously.

Both sides quietly confirmed the basic abilities of their own weapon.

Like Hal, Pavel Galad was still learning about how to use the power of dragonbane. Hal could deduce this from his various comments. In that case— Hal took a deep breath.

"How about a proposal from me?"

"Successor of the Bow, what is it?"

"It looks like both of us were testing our weapons just now. In order to put this knowledge to practical application, how about we resume this battle later?"

"Oh...?"

"You've lost that slimy minion while I want to let my friends rest. I think both sides stand to gain if we schedule a rematch..."

Despite saying that quietly, Hal was secretly in trepidation.

Galad actually had a winning tactic—Just continue fighting. Although their weapons were equally matched, the original power gap was too wide. Hal was supposed to lose badly.

However, if the battle could be postponed, Hal could expect to receive Orihime and Asya's support—

He was relying on Galad's "hot-blooded temperament" next. After all, Galad had even felt sorrow because Hal fled.

This dragon probably liked to fight fair and square. Please act like a whimsical elite dragon, Hal prayed to God whom he had never believed in.

"Hmm..."

Galad bowed his head to look at the magic wand in Hal's hand—a weapon that could be called a magic gun.

A 9mm semi-automatic pistol. Hal had fired with one hand almost every time today. Given Hal's arm strength, doing that should result in extremely low accuracy and severe arm pain.

However, Hal was able to control the magic gun easily despite firing with corresponding recoil.

'That magic just now was finally brought out by that little lady on her own when cornered without options, after exhausting both her body

and mind. That is precisely why it could be used with such ease and naturalness—'

Hal recalled what Hinokagutsuchi had said. So that was what happened.

At the same time, Galad lowered his blade.

"Very well, successor of the Bow!"

The silver dragon spoke sonorously in a beautifully masculine voice:

"Although I was very disappointed with you in the beginning, things have changed now. For a moment, I even felt elated for a showdown against you. I will acknowledge you as a candidate foe formidable enough to make my blood boil in excitement!"

"Thank you very much..."

"Then when will the rematch take place?"

Galad finally asked the decisive question. Hal took care not to reveal his joy on his face while replying:

"You originally set the deadline for sundown on the fifth day, right? Tomorrow happens to be that day. How about a rematch tomorrow at dusk?"

"That would be too slow! Much too slow!"

Galad yelled ferociously in almost a roar.

"I wish for a duel tomorrow at daybreak. I cannot wait any later than that."

"...Very well, then it is decided."

In any case, he had succeeded in buying time. Hal could not have hoped for more. He nodded.

Then Pavel Galad spread his silver-white wings and flew into the sky again.

"Let us meet again tomorrow in these parts when the sun rises. Between the successors of the Sword and the Bow, whose valor proves to be greater—It shall be decided then!"

Leaving these courageous words as a parting gift, Galad flew away.

Meanwhile, Hal had no desire for a contest of valor at all. Sighing, he slumped his shoulders greatly.

Chapter 5 - Time for Another Covenant

Part 1

"Anyway, my life is extended by half a day for now..."

After Pavel Galad departed, Hal collapsed to sit on the ground.

The magic gun of steel and gold had vanished from his right hand, presumably because the battle had ended. However, it would reappear again when needed. Hal was deeply convinced of this.

"Haruga-san! Are you hurt!?"

Hazumi rushed over to him in worry. Although the unfamiliar combat had exhausted Hal, he smiled weakly to help reassure Hazumi.

"Yeah... I'm unexpectedly fine. That white light of protection is pretty sturdy. Although I get rocked hard as though in a fishing boat sailing through a typhoon..."

"Then Haruga-kun... Is it possible that you have become able to fight a dragon one on one?" Orihime asked.

The complexion on her face looked quite poor, possibly because she had spent a great deal of stamina on sustaining Akuro-Ou.

Gazing at Hal, her eyes could not hide her worry.

"Like members of a Space Garrison from a certain Land of Light... With a shout of 'DWUAH!' or something, I transform into a red and silver superhero, even becoming giant-sized —"

"I don't think you can wrestle with giant monsters and finally win with a beam attack."

Despite cracking a joke, Orihime's expression remained very serious.

She was probably remembering what Sophocles had said. Hal decided to confess honestly.

"Although I'm quite sturdy, I still have a fragile human's body after all. Fighting that guy one on one is too much of a stretch. And right now, there are no signs that I can transform."

Hal looked up at Orihime's face and smiled weakly.

"I'm not lying, honest. I do feel sorry since you like heroes so much."

"Well... It is a shame that I won't be seeing a transformation, but..."

Perhaps feeling a load lifted off her heart for the moment, Orihime finally smiled.

"I believe you are fine the way you are, Haruga-kun. Doing a pose to transform doesn't suit you at all."

"Well, I can agree with that. But with that, the key to victory still lies with Akuro-Ou and Rushalka after all, doesn't it? They'll have to wrestle with a giant monster in my stead..."

Victory. The word coming out of his own mouth was making Hal feel exhausted.

In terms of games, Hal preferred RPGs and SLGs. He had no interest in fighting games. Then he recalled Sophocles. That man had called the Road to Kingship, which led to the ascension of dragon kings, a "game"...

"Isn't it time we got some rest? I am dead tired and it must be the same for you, Haruga-kun, right?" Orihime suddenly asked.

Hence, Hal nodded immediately.

She should be the one with greater depletion of stamina. She needed rest as soon as possible.

"Since I already promised to let you sleep until you wake up naturally, Juujouji, let's rest here for now. If you're up for it, we also have food."

"Of course I want to eat. I haven't had anything since yesterday!"

The group could finally rest as much as they wanted at the ruins of Shinjuku Fukutoshin.

From the supplies on the car, Orihime picked out chocolate, biscuits and a sports drink for instant consumption to begin simple renourishment.

A long-awaited meal after almost twenty-four hours. If it was Asya instead, she would probably wolf everything down ravenously.

However, Orihime broke the chocolate bar into small pieces, also splitting the biscuits into halves before savoring her food patiently and thoroughly. Hal wondered if this explained how Orihime was unbelievably giving off an image of politeness despite eating quite quickly.

Was this the gap in feminine charm? Hal felt deeply impressed.

Despite hiding many tomboyish hobbies, the impression Juujouji Orihime gave was a *girl* to the very letter. Perhaps this was the difference between Orihime and Asya.

After eating, Orihime lay down on a seat in the wagon and wrapped a blanket around herself.

Her breathing instantly indicated slumber, a display of fortitude so strong that she did not seem like someone who had narrowly missed death. Seeing that, her cousin, Hazumi, suddenly slumped her shoulders.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh nothing. I just feel completely inadequate when I compare myself to Nee-sama."

Hazumi gazed in mesmerization at her cousin who had rapidly fallen into deep sleep.

"I clearly became a witch first, but I couldn't protect her. Neither can I teach her anything..."

"That's because of unfavorable timing. After all, Minadzuki is currently in that state."

"But Asya-san still shone in last time's battle despite Rushalka's poor condition. And this time, she helped you a lot too. After this experience, I am feeling a desire to get stronger for the first time..."

Hal originally wanted to tell the depressed Hazumi the following:

No no no, the fault lies in humans who cultivated gentle girls into witches—people like Haruga Haruomi—You are completely blameless.

However, he did not think the self-blaming "angel" would find salvation in these words.

Hal came over to Hazumi and patted her shoulder as gently as possible.

Spontaneously relying on body language when he had no idea what to say, this was probably a bad habit he had picked up from living abroad for so long. However, there was no choice apart from staying silent in times like these.

In any case, Hal summarized a thousand thoughts into a few words.

"How should I put it? You really are a good girl. Like an angel indeed."

"N-No way!? Nothing of that sort. Although I do not see myself as a bad child, I am nowhere good enough to be described as such..."

"No no. For some reason, this is the first time in my life I want to adopt a girl from another family as my little sister."

"L-Little sister? For me to become your sister, Haruga-san!?"

"Yeah. I never thought I'd be into that sort of thing. In fact, I have a friend in Taiwan called Phillip who's an authority on this genre of game."

"By game... Are you referring to 'little sister games'? I cannot imagine what they are about at all."

Reserved yet more inquisitive than average, Hazumi made an expression approaching a smile, seemingly forgetting her earlier melancholy within the blink of an eye.

"I would like to try playing one."

"Really? Then next time a chance comes up—"

Just as the conversation livened up, Hal and Hazumi looked up at the same time.

This was due to feeling a chill along their spine. By the time they noticed, concentrated magical power had filled this corner in western Shinjuku. The density was high enough to adhere to skin, producing a feeling as though one could reach out and touch it.

"This feeling is the same as inside Tokyo Station last time...?"

"Precisely. Thanks to the silvery brat opening the secret records of Ruruk Soun and your forging of a wand too. I never expected to obtain the essence required for a ritual this quickly."

Having taken corporeal form at some point, Hinokagutsuchi spoke patronizingly.

"Energy from the ocean of stars you summoned back then has gathered. Well done."

"By ritual, don't tell me you mean—"

"Yes. O little lady, make haste and prepare yourself if you have yet to do so."

Hinokagutsuchi stared squarely at Hazumi with her golden eyes.

"Fulfill the earlier deal. Do as I demand. In exchange, I shall grant you power—or rather, kindling leading to power. Whether you can turn it into a blaze depends entirely on you."

"Kindling leading to fire...?"

"I shall have your 'serpent,' that Minadzuki something or other, undergo a transformational rebirth."

The self-styled devil smiled mysteriously and extended her hand. This situation prompted Hazumi to gasp in surprise, her entire expression frozen.

Part 2

"By ritual, you're talking about what you made Juujouji go through, right? By the way, what do you mean by rebirth?"

Hal questioned Hinokagutsuchi in a somewhat displeased tone of voice.

The self-styled devil looked at Hal in amusement and replied readily.

"Pouring the abundant essence here into that 'serpent' so as to bring about the rebirth of its decrepit body and heartmetal. This little lady's body shall serve as the seedbed. Although it is impossible to predict how far she can go, at the very least, she will find the 'serpent' easier to handle than before."

Hinokagutsuchi stared sharply at Hal.

"Extracting the reborn 'serpent' will be your job."

"But will Shirasaka suffer the same pain as Juujouji last time?"

"That cannot be avoided. After all, one cannot gain mastery over power without paying a price."

"It seems that Shirasaka's health isn't too good and I really can't condone this kind of coercion using a deal as an excuse. If she says on her own that she wants to do it, then fine..."

In a rare display, Hal prioritized his true feelings over calculated pros and cons, choosing pessimistic opposition.

However, Hal realized that at times like these, Shirasaka Hazumi would probably insist:

"I-I wish to do it. It is a promise after all. If Minadzuki's health could be recovered, then I want to make an attempt whatever it takes."

Hazumi gave the predicted response. Despite some slight stiffness, her expression was filled with determination.

Hal sighed. Hazumi's decision was correct. Since it could bolster their combat potential to some extent, they should do everything they could to this end. Under the current circumstances, there was no choice more correct than that.

Even so, Hal still said something in bad grace, uncharacteristically.

"I really want to stop you as an overprotective older brother..."

"Please save that for a future opportunity."

Although a little stiff, that smile of absolute pureness returned.

"Rather than getting looked after, Haruga-san, I would like you to order me around more."

"Order around? You want me to order you around?"

"To be honest, this idea had occurred to me. I think it would be very interesting if I could become your assistant, Haruga-san."

Hal exclaimed "eh?" in surprise, because the girl most removed from malice in the entire world had smiled mischievously. Lowering her voice, Hazumi said:

"...In truth, I am different from Nee-sama. My childhood favorites were the likes of gentlemen thieves rather than righteous detectives. I also liked archaeologists who wiped out precious ruins under the pretext of exploration and adventure..."

"You mean those guys? The Fiend with Twenty Faces or the Jones family, for example."

"Fufufu, yes. That is why, if you don't mind, Haruga-san, I hope you could tell me stories about the world—"

Although Shirasaka Hazumi was undoubtedly an angel, those wings that were meant to be pure white seemed to have a few brown feathers mixed in them.

Finding out the surprising truth, Hal stared at her intently.

"I am no good with physical activity and have my duties as a witch, so I cannot become an adventurer like them. But if I could work as an assistant, perhaps I could help out in some small way... So—"

Hazumi looked up to examine Hal's demeanor.

"I know I am asking to be hired as an assistant when you are in dire straits in many ways at the moment, Haruga-san... But if I gain a stronger and livelier Minadzuki... Will it help my case?"

"Is that the angle you're going for? Well, that'll surely add a lot of points."

After giving that reply, Hal glanced at Hinokagutsuchi.

The self-styled devil had her arms crossed with a textbook look of *smugness* on her face.

"Didn't I say so? This girl has spine and a good head on her shoulders. Placed by your side, she ought to be useful to a commensurate extent at least, yes?"

"Cut the 'commensurate extent' stuff, it's too presumptuous. By the way..."

Hal glared sternly at Hinokagutsuchi and said, "It was the same with Juujouji too. You like to leave me to my own devices, yet you're very diligent in trying to increase my number of comrades—like witches?"

"Fool. At times like these, you ought to feel grateful for my benevolence and express your thanks while kneeling."

"Like anyone would believe benevolence coming from the mouth of a self-styled devil. But I get the feeling that Juujouji will get mad if she finds out... Still, it would be nice to have an assistant's help once in a while."

Hal muttered quietly. Hazumi's unintentional humor and prank had brought salvation to his soul.

If this girl were to fall into danger, ultimately, he would try his hardest to handle things appropriately, so as to rescue her. Hal thought to himself then said, "Okay—Let's start that whatever ritual."

By the time they noticed, it was already dusk. The setting sun was dyeing former Shinjuku Fukutoshin a vivid orange. It was now the same time of the day as Akuro-Ou's birth.

An ambiguous time neither night nor day, what was known as the twilight hour.

The time when monsters and demons were on the prowl. The hours when all sorts of specters materialized to wander the human realm—

After explaining to Hazumi the steps of the birthing ritual, Hinokagutsuchi arrogantly ordered "Hurry and prepare" so Hazumi entered a building in front of them. Then some time passed.

"I-I am ready..."

Hazumi returned. She was speaking in a feeble voice while shrinking in embarrassment.

"I-I have already followed your instructions of 'undressing as much as possible'..."

"Hmm. Well, not bad at all."

Hinokagutsuchi appraised Hazumi's attire with an air of importance.

Hazumi had been wearing her school uniform but now she was only wrapped in a flimsy shawl. The knitted shawl was draped over her shoulders, hanging down to the vicinity of her hips.

Due to the shawl's large size and Hazumi's petite figure, virtually all of her upper torso above the hip was covered up.

But that was all that was covered up.

Every other part was exposed. Her delicate and slim arms and legs, her pale and slender thighs, and that extraordinarily seductive neck were all clear to see. Possibly due to the unbearable embarrassment, Hazumi was squirming, causing the shawl to sway, exposing pink fabric at her hip.

On her body was only a large shawl and underwear. This was Hazumi's current attire.

"However, little lady, where did you find this piece of cloth?"

"I brought it, thinking just in case it might be cold..."

"Hmph. To think I was hoping to view a maiden's unseemly appearance as much as I pleased."

"S-Sorry."

Despite grumbling verbally, Hinokagutsuchi still nodded at the terrified Hazumi and motioned for her to sit down.

This was in front of a high-rise building. There were stairs leading up to the building's entrance. Hazumi sat down on the third step from the bottom.

"First, I shall touch Minadzuki's soul through your body—then extract her heartmetal."

Speaking very absurd words matter-of-factly, Hinokagutsuchi extended her left hand and touched Hazumi's chest with only the shawl between them!

Then the self-styled devil's face tensed up with a "Hmm?"

"Little lady... You are topless. Did you remove it?"

"Ah, yes. Because you said to 'undress as much as possible'..."

Hal did not know if it was because she could not comprehend why Hinokagutsuchi was surprised, but Hazumi was looking lost.

Meanwhile, Hal began to get flustered. Topless. Removed. So it meant that she had removed her upper torso's underwear—commonly known as a bra?

Hazumi must have been so thorough for the sake of following orders.

"S-Sorry. Is this no good?"

"Nay, the opposite. You have done very well. Yes. A developing bust with a sense of indescribable innocence and modesty, truly marvelous."

"Eh—Ahhh!?"

"Fufufu. The thing I want is inside here. Are you ready?"

"Ehhh!? H-Hinokagutsuchi-san, why are you touching—that kind of place!? A-Ahhh!? T-That place is..."

Reaching her left hand through the shawl's gap, Hinokagutsuchi played with the young girl's breast.

Just as the panicking Hazumi twisted her body, the shawl slid from her shoulders. Since her bare chest was about to be exposed, Hal intended to look away.

But before he could do that, he saw.

A part of the body that Hazumi did not emphasize. Rather than twin peaks, they would be better described as hills. Hinokagutsuchi's hand had reached deep into that pale mound. Even her wrist was sinking in.

As though performing superpowered surgery, her hand was inserted into Hazumi's body!

"It will tickle, so bear with it briefly. Look, it is done."

"Oh—"

Hinokagutsuchi swiftly drew out her left hand. Held in that hand was a metal sphere, emerald in color.

It was very similar to Akuro-Ou's heartmetal that Hal had seen in last time's ritual. Hal asked, "Hey, don't tell me that's..."



"Mm-hmm. It is Minadzuki's heartmetal."

In other words, a priestess' heart was connected directly to the heartmetal of her 'serpent'?

While Hal was stunned at the revelation, Hazumi hastily repositioned the shawl to cover herself. Meanwhile, Hinokagutsuchi handed the heartmetal over.

Finally? Hal received the emerald heartmetal.

"The steps are just as he explained... Begin."

"Y-Yes."

Sitting on the steps, Hazumi was originally arching her back in embarrassment, leaning forward slightly.

But now, she was lying down with her back against the step, her slender legs extended straight. Probably in consideration for Hal, she wanted him to perform his task conveniently.

Due to that, Hazumi's waist, previously covered by the shawl, was now in full view.

Her skin was astoundingly pale with very smooth texture. And due to her current posture, even her pink underwear was clear to see. However, the biggest problem was the chest area.

Although it was covered by the shawl over her shoulders, only the top half of her mildly bulging bosom was covered.

Even though it was just the bottom half of Hazumi's breasts, Hal could still see them after all. This was making him lose composure greatly. Be that as it may, faced with the girl who was aspiring to become his assistant, Hal had no choice but to maintain a solemn expression in desperation.

A superb acting performance of the one in a lifetime sort. However —

"Sure enough, size is not everything..."

He murmured to himself at a volume that no one could hear.

In addition, when he made eye contact by chance with Hinokagutsuchi, who was observing from the sidelines, the two of them nodded as though they were allies and fellow connoisseurs.

But no matter what, the ritual was the most important right now. Hal focused his attention on the girl before his eyes.

Holding the emerald heartmetal he had just received, he gazed straight into Hazumi's eyes.

"Then I'll start?"

"P-Please do."

In fact, Hal was nervous too but to reassure her, he pretended to be very experienced. That being said, it was his second time conducting the ritual. This time, he was calmer.

Thanks to that, Hal could even sense what sort of magic had been cast on the heartmetal in his right hand. No, not just his hand. This place—there was magic cast on the entire "venue." Hal noticed this for the first time. It was the magic that Hinokagutsuchi had cast before the ritual began.

Following an altered version of the ancient covenant ritual.

To complete this aforementioned ritual, Hal slowly reached out.

Then he thrust Minadzuki's heartmetal into Hazumi's abdomen. But rather than all at once, he did it bit by bit. Slowly, he pushed bit by bit.

Probably starting to feel pain, Hazumi showed suffering on her face.

When the heartmetal was one-third of the way in, her angelic face became even more distorted.

"~~~~~!"

She finally made a sound, but it was a moan of pain without words.

Hal could not help but pause and started to pull the heartmetal out.

"P-Please don't stop. I beg you, please... go all the way."

"Yes, I know. However, we'll slow it down for you to get used to it."

Faced with Hazumi's tearful request, Hal consoled her.

The younger witch was panting heavily with her eyes filled with tears. The pain was most likely that intense. Speaking of which, after Akuro-Ou's birth, Orihime had commented that her "abdomen felt like it was burning, it was so hot and painful"...

Hazumi seemed to be suffering more than Orihime last time, was it because of her younger age?

Although it did not take a long time, it was a ritual to give birth to life after all. Something like this happening would not be strange.

Hal cautiously inserted his hand into Hazumi's body.

"Mm... Mmmm!"

Hazumi panted painfully. Even so, Hal still slowly pushed the heartmetal inwards.

In the process of this action repeating between pauses, Hazumi gradually grew accustomed to it. Finally, the emerald heartmetal was buried inside Hazumi's abdomen together with Hal's wrist.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes, I am still okay..."

Although Hazumi still seemed to be suffering, at least her condition was stable for now.

Then the moment arrived at last. The heartmetal held in Hal's hand began to pulsate.

Throb, throb. Beating like a heart. Clearly it was just a small sphere, small enough to hold in one's hand, yet the beating was astoundingly strong.

"Haruga-san... Minadzuki is—"

Hazumi probably felt the beating too. She spoke with tears in her eyes.

Despite her crying, she looked overjoyed. The sense of fulfillment and accomplishment seemed to make her forget the pain within the blink of an eye. When Hal motioned with his eyes, she nodded.

Having obtained permission, Hal swiftly drew out his right hand from Hazumi's body.

"Mm—mmmmmmmmmm!"

In the end, the pain made Hazumi cry out. However, she stared at Hal's right hand with happiness on her face.

Minadzuki's heartmetal was glowing there. The emerald sphere had turned translucent. Inside was a tiny ring of fire—

Indeed. Burning inside the interior of the reborn heartmetal was a small red flame.

Hazumi was sweating all over while she gazed at the sphere with a face of happiness. She had probably tried her best, depleting all her energy. Hal spoke up, "No time to lose. Call out Minadzuki now."

"Yes!"

Hazumi looked up in the air. A red spray of blood instantly appeared in the dusk sky.

However, the gigantic serpentine dragon leviathan was not there. Only an amorphous black shadow was occupying that spot. Due to the

extraction of her heartmetal, Minadzuki had presumably lost her physical body.

The spray of blood in the air became bigger and bigger, gradually increasing in density as well.

It would turn into a mist of blood at this rate, perishing tragically. However, the new heartmetal floated up from Hal's hand and rose in the sky, drawn to the blood spray and amorphous shadow.

The "serpent" in its pitiful form immediately vanished, replaced by —

"Although it was a difficult delivery, the birth is finished at last."

Hinokagutsuchi spoke softly. In front of her gaze, the serpentine dragon leviathan was coiled up in the air, adding emerald color to the evening glow in the sky.

Part 3

Roughly an hour after the sun had set completely, Orihime woke up.

"Nee-sama, you're already able to get up!?"

"Yes. It somehow feels so incredible. I was clearly so exhausted earlier, yet now I've fully recovered my energy."

Getting off the car, Orihime replied to Hazumi nonchalantly.

Then she immediately started stretching exercises. Her movements were quite lively. Hal looked around. There was still a portion of magical power remaining from what Hinokagutsuchi had gathered for the ritual.

The night sky was also very clear. The beautiful waning moon was gradually climbing the sky.

"Is this why I recovered...?"

A land with a high concentration of magical power. Moonrise. Night. These were all crucial factors conferring power upon witches.

The moon and the night were particularly important. The magical power consumed by a leviathan's invocation of pseudo-divinity was fully replenished with every arrival of night, thus resetting the usage limit.

"So your body wasn't low in energy due to injury or illness but just overuse of your 'serpent.'"

Hal nodded then called to the girls in his company.

"Since Juujouji seems fine, let's find a more suitable campsite and prepare to spend the night."

"Campsite? I've never stayed overnight in a wasteland before."

"Are you sure we shouldn't return to New Town? That way, we could get some proper rest, right?"

Confronted with the bold plan for the night, Hazumi brightened up whereas Orihime offered a sensible opinion.

However, Hal had reasons for not wanting to return to New Town.

"We could, but I think explaining things to Hiiragi-san and the others will waste a lot of time if we go back after finding Juujouji so easily despite the slim prospects of her survival. They're already starting to get very suspicious."

"F-Fair enough."

"And we have to be back before dawn, so I'd like to put the troublesome stuff aside for now."

"Understood. I was hoping to go back to New Town for a refreshing bath with hot water—But I guess I should give up on the notion. It is an emergency after all..."

Hal only realized upon seeing Orihime's shoulder slump in dejection. So she wanted to take a bath?

Deciding it was probably quite a pressing need for girls, Hal offered in a gesture of goodwill:

"Although a fully automatic hot water supply is out of the question, I guess it's still possible to prepare a bath."

Instantly, the two girls' eyes lit up.

Then roughly two hours passed—

The trio began to "camp" on the sports ground of a middle school in the former Chiyoda ward.

The girls were in charge of cooking dinner. They used a portable gas burner to boil water, heat up bread and thick slices of ham, fry eggs and even prepare instant coffee.

Simple camping-style food was prepared in succession.

"Fufufu. It feels like such a long time since I last cooked together with Nee-sama."

"Because you've been busy with your work as a witch, Hazumi."

Hazumi and Orihime both seemed unaccustomed to cooking outdoors, but they worked very happily.

Meanwhile, Hal was proceeding smoothly with preparations for a "bath."

Picking up a number of concrete blocks from rubble in the ruins, he arranged them into two rows with stuff like twigs and scraps paper for kindling in between, thus creating a hearth.

Then on top of the hearth, he placed a large steel drum. After using a plastic bucket to pour roughly a hundred liters of water into the steel drum, preparations were complete for the most part.

Hal lit the hearth to begin boiling the water in the steel drum.

"But Haruga-kun, I can't believe you had all this stuff stored here?"

"There's been recurring trouble in the Concession wasteland lately after all, so I thought I'd making various preparations in case of emergencies. I came over here whenever I had time, transporting water and equipment while I was at it."

That was Hal's reply to Orihime when she came over to check thing out.

These were the "sundry chores" that Hal had been handling in Old Tokyo lately. After selecting ten-odd sites easily accessible by car, he had hidden supplies there.

The supplies included water, food, medication, wireless transceivers, all sorts of equipment, daily necessities, etc.

Patrolling these ten-odd sites, he had gathered the necessary supplies.

"I can understand about keeping water and equipment, but the steel drum truly surprises me..."

"It's very handy. You can even light a fire inside and use it as a stove."

Hal was four the first time he used this simple bathing device. His first attempt to create one himself was when he was seven. Having grown completely accustomed to it, Hal was able to enjoy a Japanese bath anywhere in the world, no matter how remote or undeveloped, so long as he could locate water.

However, boiling the water would require a hour. Hence, this waiting time was used for dinner.

The trio moved school desks into the sports ground to serve as a dining table, sitting around it to have dinner. The vicinity was illuminated by LED lighting placed in the center of the dining table formed from an arrangement of four desks.

Hal instantly tried the fried egg appreciatively. Delicious.

While enjoying the outdoor dinner, Hal was jolted by a sudden realization. He became aware that there was something more important, slightly later tonight.

"Hey Haruga-kun, don't tell me that you are really enjoying yourself right now? It feels like you're in quite a good mood."

"Does it seem that way? I think you're imagining it."

"Fufufufu. I love this. I'm so happy."

"Oh my, I'm glad to hear that from you, Shirasaka."

"...?"

Just as Hazumi smiled like an angel, Hal responded calmly and Orihime cocked her head in puzzlement, dinner finally came to a conclusion.

"I'll clean up."

Taking up Hazumi's offer, Hal gratefully made his way to the makeshift bath.

Sufficiently heated up, the water temperature in the steel drum was perfect. Hal nodded with an expression of mission accomplished. If he looked in the mirror this moment, he would surely be greeted by a steady smile in the reflection. However—

"Excuse me, Haruga-kun. I'm sorry for interrupting you while you're busy preparing the bath water, but may I ask why are you looking so happy?" Orihime asked, arriving next to him.

Hal immediately answered.

"Not at all. It's not like I'm happy or anything like that. Yeah."

"But right now, you're grinning from ear to ear, you know?"

"...If anything, I suppose it's due to my virtues of fraternity and benevolence. I am very happy to help someone out."

Was Hal reusing a line from the self-styled deil because he had a guilty conscience?

"But wait, I remember now. Haruga-kun, I think you once described yourself as being a 'covert' something or other."

"....."

"So, when is the friendly Haruga-kun planning to depart from his position in front of the bath?"

"What are you talking about, Juujouji? If I don't stay, who's going to tend to the fire?"

"Are you simply tending to the fire? Do you dare swear that you won't engage in any perverted antics like peeking?"

"How could I possibly commit crimes like those?"

Seeing that the game was up, Hal decided to come clean with his thoughts.

"About tending to the fire, I was simply hoping it'd be nice if I ended up catching a good view. In other words, testing my luck. I'm wondering if that friendly old man in the sky might grant good luck or something..."

"Well then, Haruga-kun, you may tend to the fire on the side, but you must be blindfolded."

"Ehhh!?"

Instantly, the smiling Orihime looked almost like a goddess of misfortune.

Splash, splish, splosh. The sound of water could be heard.

Then there was the cracking of the wood fire under the steel drum. Hal found himself more sensitive to sound due to the blindfold blocking his vision. Right now, he was sitting next to the fire.

Next, he heard Juujouji exclaiming in pleasure—

"Hoo... This hot water is excellent..."

A much desired bath seemed to help Orihime relax her body and mind.

"I'd love to continue soaking here forever... It's almost like paradise~"

"Fufufu, you seem very comfortable, Nee-sama."

"Of course, this is truly the cleansing of life itself."

Hazumi commented while watching from the side and Orihime answered in a very relaxed voice. Right now, she was probably enjoying this Japanese-style bliss.

One should not find this surprising. After all, she was having a bath after experiencing a state of utter exhaustion of that sort.

Surely she must be showing a countenance of extreme bliss. Hal really wanted to have a look, even if it was just her face. Although he tried to forget his desire for the view below the neck, Hal still could not help but imagine Orihime's entire body.

To eliminate his evil thoughts, Hal asked:

"Umm... Juujouji, how's the fire?"

"No problem~ The temperature is perfect. Very comfortable. It's all thanks to you, Haruga-kun."

"That's wonderful. Just so you know, I won't be able to adjust the fire even if you made a request."

"Fufufu, your eyes are totally covered after all. But this isn't bad. Now you can easily prevail over your evil thoughts, right?"

"But I'm now left with nothing to do. Isn't it time for me to do something at your service?"

"Now that you've said that, I suppose it's fine for you to take off the blindfold. But please put it on again when I exit the bath, okay?"

Orihime finally smiled with generosity and open-mindedness as per her usual style.

Hal gratefully untied the knot behind his head and took off the blindfold. In front of him was the makeshift hearth and steel drum bath. Soaking in the hot water, Orihime was showing a blissful looking face.

Right now, she was sitting in the drum with her knees drawn up to her chest. The hot water reached up to her shoulders.

Hazumi was sitting next to the makeshift bath, watching her older cousin.

"Oh Haruga-kun, you'll have to keep crouching and not stand up. This is a promise, okay?"

"Got it. I will stoop low, keep my head down and focus on the fire."

This steel drum, used as a bath tub, was almost 90cm in height.

If he were to stand up, Hal would be able to see Orihime's naked body sitting in the hot water just by gazing downwards. Hal obediently submitted to the orders she had given to prevent such a situation from happening. Then Hazumi said with a slightly wry smile, "But Nee-sama, I feel that Haruga-san probably won't do things like peeking..."

"Did you hear that, Haruga-kun? Can you assert in front of Hazumi that she is right?"

"Fufufu, of course."

"..."

"H-Haruga-san?"

"Listen carefully, Shirasaka. In this world, all men can be divided into the two categories of 'perverts' and 'covert perverts.' By the way, I belong to the covert type."

"Is that true!?"

"To think you could confess without hesitation in such a situation, I'm begging to feel that you are some kind of bigshot, Haruga-kun..."

"So this is what's known as a man... I-I'm learning so much here..."

"H-Hazumi, stop feeling emotional over weird things!"

"Sorry, Nee-sama... But in that case, Haruga-san, was it the same during that time too...?"

"Uh... I'd be lying if I claimed that no evil thoughts crossed my mind."

"!? U-Umm, but I felt that... Haruga-san, you were quite gentlemanly?"

"Thank you for saying that..."

"Uh, excuse me. What time was 'that time'?"

Orihime's extremely relaxed voice changed back to her usual tone.

Hal secretly jumped in surprise. Speaking of which, he had yet to report to Orihime about Minadzuki's rebirth. This was because they had been busy preparing the camp ever since Orihime woke up.

And the honest Hazumi instantly answered.

"U-Umm, I haven't brought it up yet, Nee-sama, but actually, we conducted a ritual while you were sleeping. In other words, the ritual for bestowing a 'serpent' with new life, in the same manner as your Akuro-Ou's case."

"A ritual in the same manner as my case? You did that too—Ehhh!?"

Orihime seemed quite taken aback. She was so surprised that she stood up in the bath.

Hot water splashed out while her pale and naked body became exposed.

Indeed. Naked body. Just to repeat, the steel drum's height was roughly 90cm.

Furthermore, to avoid burns, a thick piece of wood had been placed at the bottom of the drum for insulation like in a Goemon bath where an iron cauldron was heated directly.

With a height little more than 160cm, if Orihime stood up in such a situation, naturally, her entire upper body would come into view—

Not wearing a blindfold, Hal looked up and saw at close range.

A supreme figure with a very tight waist and voluptuous in all the right places.

Shaped like small cantaloupes, two bulges visually estimated to be F-cups—Hal not only watched the two round shapes quiver and bounce, but caught a thorough glimpse of the pink parts in the front as well.

Furthermore, he also witnessed the instant when Orihime's entire body turned bright red due to shame rather than heat.

Fortunately, everything below the seductive navel was hidden inside the steel drum...

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

The one who had brought unexpected good fortune was not the unfriendly goddess.

Instead, it was the girl who had been careless to the point of airheadedness. Hal came to a clear realization of that.



Part 4

"Ooooooooooh! I can't believe I made such a major blunder..."

"Not really, I think it's exactly the kind of blunder you'd make."

"S-Stop twisting the knife in the wound! You're supposed to console others gently in times like these!"

The depressed Orihime was sitting on the lawn in a corner of the sports ground, hugging her knees to her chest.

She sounded energetic enough when she replied to Hal who was sitting next to her. However, getting seen naked seemed to have dealt quite a severe blow to her. Orihime kept her head down the whole time.

The time was approaching 10pm. Everyone had taken a bath and gotten changed.

All that remained was getting some rest, but Orihime was still sitting in depression on the school grounds.

As the prime culprit, Hal could not go to sleep first, so he came over to check out her condition. As a side note, he had already asked Hazumi to go to bed since they had to rise early the next morning.

"B-But I couldn't help it. I jumped in surprise when I heard that Hazumi had gone through that ritual."

"She really worked hard for Minadzuki's revival."

"Y-Yes, I would think so. She is a very good girl after all. However, that painful ritual was quite an ordeal even for me, combined with the fact that you're such a pervert, Haruga-kun, it must have been rough for her..."

"Umm, I do count as a gentleman of sorts, you know?"

"Gentleman, I'll give you that, but an imposter gentleman who openly confessed to being a covert..."

"Oh my, that's indeed true."

"You were also staring at me continuously in the bath without averting your gaze the slightest."

"Sorry, because it was too sudden, I totally didn't know what to do."

"Ooooooooooh. Haruga-kun, you pervert and king of lust. You should smash your head against tofu and simply die—Wait, that sounds too pitiful, so just get a head bump!"

"Sure, I can do something of that level any time. After all, I saw something really awesome."

"Q-Quit saying it was awesome or something!"

Orihime would apparently speak childishly when overwhelmed by embarrassment.

Hugging her legs with her face pressed against her lap, she refused to look in his direction. Hal felt his heart skip a beat. The flustered Orihime was so adorable—He could not help but think that even though it was rude.

Meanwhile, Orihime finally lifted her head in front of the disconcerted Hal.

"Ooh, f-forget it. This is part of the price for Minadzuki's revival... I've decided to think of it that way. Getting my entire body ogled by Haruga-kun's lecherous gaze was a necessary sacrifice!"

"Ahhh, yes. Back there, I was really treated to an extremely wonderful—"

"I told you to stop saying that! R-Right, listen here."

Finally recovering, Orihime asked him:

"Do you think... there's any chance for victory tomorrow?"

"Probably not."

"Hold on, Haruga-kun."

"No, it's just that the more I think about it calmly, the less I feel that there's a chance of victory. I even considered simply running away from the battle, but if we did that, he'll definitely become furious."

Pavel Galad's personality was very easy to grasp.

Hal said with certainty, "Flying into a terrible rage, he'll rampage violently all over Japan... I really don't want to imagine how much destruction he'll cause."

"Indeed... Having caused such a terrible tragedy, Haruga-kun, would you start wandering the burning streets, overwhelmed by a guilty conscience?"

"Although I confess to being thick-skinned enough, I might actually consider suicide."

"In the end, all we can do is fight. Not just you, Haruga-kun, but also us, the witches—including Hazumi and Asya-san."

Hal and Orihime exchanged nods then smiled faintly with wryness in unison.

Pessimism would not help the situation at all, so all they could do was smile. After smiling, they would sigh helplessly and continue to struggle relentlessly with all their strength.

"Compared to fleeing without a fight, attempting a battle but failing is much more acceptable."

"Losing is only natural, while a draw or better outcome would be profit. There's no choice but to confront the enemy with that kind of mindset."

After listening to Orihime's description, Hal could not help but feel intrigued.

Among those involved in resisting dragons, there were many who styled themselves as villains, and Orihime was gradually picking up the same vibes. Perhaps Hal and Asya were guilty as her source of influence.

"After learning about elite dragons recently, I've had this kind of feeling... If a full-scale war were to break out, we humans would probably lose utterly to the dragons, right?"

"Yeah. That's why humanity grudgingly accepted the unequal treaty and even offered tribute under the name of relief supplies."

"In that case, Haruga-kun, having obtained a legendary weapon, you have no choice but to become the hero. Asya-san and I can serve as your comrades, you know?"

"A hero's tiny group is not enough to oppose the demon king's forces. We need an army at least."

After saying that, Hal stared intently at the classmate who was sitting next to him.

Then he scratched his head. He originally wanted to say something but could not. Hesitating, he was unable to muster the resolve.

"What's the matter, Haruga-kun? You're showing a solemn expression all of a sudden."

"Nothing much, I'm just feeling how wonderful it is that you survived, safe and sound... Back when you were missing, I was so depressed that I even surprised myself."

"Y-You, Haruga-kun? Stop lying."

"Do I look like I'm lying? Besides, I failed to keep my promise, the one about trying my hardest to handle things appropriately."

"Didn't you handle it very well? You definitely came running to save me. And today, you worked hard too to resist that silver dragon."

"But had I used that ability sooner, Juujouji, you'd —"

"Stop there and avoid the hypotheticals, okay? Since we're both novices, all we need is to help each other and discuss things together. Just like when we were watching a movie."

"Help each other eh..."

"Yes."

"Then Juujouji, can I ask you for a favor?"

Hal tried to put on a poker face as much as possible, staring straight into Orihime's eyes while he spoke.

"I want you. Will you give everything of yours to me?"

"Ehhhh?"

For the next minute or two, Orihime reacted unexpectedly.

Her entire body was completely frozen. Her gaze wandered left and right. Her mouth gaped open, unable to answer. Then staring intently, she gazed at Hal's face, her prim and proper face tense from surprise and loss of composure.

To think Orihime could act this flustered, how unexpected.

"S-So, Haruga-kun, were you serious just now?"

"Of course."

"But you've already go Asya-san. T-This is too sudden. I've never thought about this sort of thing in my entire life!"

Finishing with a torrent of words, Orihime then added hastily:

"However, it's not like I dislike you, Haruga-kun!"

"I think Asya is irrelevant to this. It's this sudden because we're out of time. I'm really sorry about that. Well then, even if you've never thought about it, I hope you can start thinking immediately. Also—"

After responding to every point raised by Orihime, Hal finally nodded.

"I'm really happy to hear that you don't dislike me."

"H-How could I possibly dislike you?"

This time, Orihime blushed and looked down as though evading Hal's gaze.

"Although we haven't been acquainted for long, we have experienced so much together already. And I'd consider our personalities quite compatible, don't you agree? H-However, it's still too fast no matter what!"

"It's definitely fast, but I still hope for an immediate answer. Otherwise, we won't make it in time."

"I-Is it because we might die in the battle tomorrow...?"

"Rather, I should say that we won't make it in time for the battle itself. But if I can't entrust power to your Akuro-Ou, chances of dying will be very high, so I guess you could put it that way."

"Eh... Akuro-Ou?"

"Yeah. A vassal covenant."

"!?"

In that instant, Orihime stared wide-eyed, then hung her head helplessly.

"I-I thought you were confessing for sure..."

"Uh, why?"

"B-B-B-Because you said that sort of thing suddenly, I couldn't help but interpret it in that direction."

"Since I directly plagiarized the invitation method previously suggested by Hinokagutsuchi after all, I thought you'd notice."

"I totally didn't notice your obscure foreshadowing!"

Orihime suddenly felt drained of energy, possibly due to finding liberation from nervousness.

"My goodness... Don't scare me. Since you clearly said *that* in the past, this really surprised me. I thought my heart would jump out of my chest."

"I said what?"

"You said I'd be 'a girl who is very troublesome to get into a relationship with.'"

"Oh I see, that comment, but I think I'm in the wrong now."

"W-What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing much. Many things did happen after that, so even someone like me has started to feel your charm. Or rather, I've come to realize that I was blind."

"M-My charm?"

"Yeah. Although there are still some troublesome aspects, I think that if you and I were to enter that kind of relationship, many awesome things will probably happen."

"~~~~~. S-Stop saying such weird things. This is totally unlike you, Haruga-kun!"

A sports ground at night, the ruins of a middle school inside a wasteland.

Sitting side by side on the lawn, the two of them started looking up at the sky at some point in time.

The waning moon was shining with white light while the starry sky stretched infinitely. Since there was no artificial lighting inside this wasteland of a dragon concession territory, the stars were astoundingly

beautiful. But having visited places all over the globe, Hal had seen equally beautiful starry skies so many times that he was tired of them.

Although by this point, there was absolutely no sense of novelty, the stars tonight felt surprisingly dazzling.

Was it because Juujouji Orihime was beside him? Hal inadvertently looked to the side and happened to meet Orihime's gaze.

Her face was a bit red, possibly feeling embarrassed about her loss of composure earlier. Classmate. Comrade. She had called the two of them friends and said that all they needed to do was help each other.

A smile was blooming naturally on her face. Whether Hal or her, the two of them laughed together.

In that very instant, Hal felt as though Orihime had opened her heart to him.

"Juujouji...?"

"Haruga-kun...?"

The two of them called each other's name and gazed at each other. Right now, she was feeling the same thing.

Certain of this, Hal extended his right hand. Orihime extended her left hand in response. With their hands overlapping, their hearts also came together —

"Although I don't know how far I can go... Are you willing to follow me?"

"Although I don't know how far I can follow you... I intend to fight alongside you to the very end, Haruga-kun. I will devote all effort in my attempt."

After their verbal promise, the Rune of the Bow immediately appeared in the center of Hal's right palm.

The same symbol also surfaced on the back of Orihime's left hand. The vassal covenant was established.

"Only after trying it... did I realize it was this simple."

"Because too much happened, in the end, we didn't figure out what was actually the success factor."

"Y-Yeah."

The two of them released their hands. With that, they had accomplished what they needed to do that night.

Hurrying to sleep and saving up energy was probably what they should be doing next. However, neither of them wanted to stand up. Somehow, they felt a little reluctant to part.

"B-By the way, Haruga-kun, going out with me... Is it really okay with you?"

"Sure. There's no point in lying about this sort of thing, Juujouji, but you wouldn't say yes, would you? After all, you described this sort of thing as impossible before."

"Did I...?"

Saying that, Hal placed his left hand on the grass.

But spontaneously, Orihime also placed her left hand next to his hand. Just by moving one or two centimeters closer, the pair's hands would touch again.

This sense of distance made Hal feel embarrassed yet happy at the same time.

Oddly enough, for some unknown reason, Hal was certain that Orihime was feeling the same way—

In the shadows of the school building, out of Hal and Orihime's sight,

Shirasaka Hazumi pressed her hand on her unsettled chest, trying to calm herself. It was because she had accidentally witnessed the scene of her cousin establishing a covenant with Hal.

It was not on purpose. She had come looking for them because she could not sleep.

Sensing that Orihime and Hal seemed to be in a world of their own, Hazumi hastily hid.

The rapid beating in her chest finally calmed down. Committing herself to some kind of decision, Hazumi looked up then nodded firmly.

Part 5

"In the end, the enemy has been quiet all the way to the fourth day of the deadline period? That's quite rule-abiding for a dragon."

"But then again, it's also weird to call a dragon honest in personality."

Hiiragi Yukari shrugged after her assistant, Kenjou, offered his opinion.

Racing along the Tokyo New Town Expressway—commonly called the New Expressway—was a classy domestic car with Kenjou as the driver and Yukari sitting alone in the back seat.

It was late at night. In one more hour, the date was going to change.

"Or does the dragon have ulterior motives?"

"There's probably no need to be concerned about that. After all, there's nothing we could do apart from slight adjustments in combat forces to support Asya-san's group."

"Your description is definitely over the top, but you're very right."

Listening to Yukari's overly perfunctory comment, Kenjou smiled wryly while driving.

"With that, Miss Shirasaka will be excluded from actual combat forces. Now that's really painful. If I recall correctly, she's still on standby at the MPD, right?"

"No. She went with Haruomi-kun this morning to Old Tokyo. To search for Orihime-san."

"Is her 'serpent' in such poor condition that you permitted her to leave?"

"If Minadzuki is forced to fight at full strength for three minutes, her body will break down even faster... That is what Istanbul headquarters concluded. By the way, Rushalka's time limit for activity is fifteen minutes."

"And Miss Orihime's survival is unlikely... Should we prepare a white flag first?"

"Dragonkind surely won't know what that means. The only remaining hope is to gather helpers from abroad by sundown tomorrow."

"Every domestic group is refusing to heed the summons. It's getting increasingly harder to get by in this world."

Continuing a conversation that was neither grumbling nor chatting, they awaited the arrival of the next day.

Then the night deepened. It was midnight just before the date changed.

Asya was at her assigned hotel room with arms crossed.

Despite being on standby at the MPD, she was a certified master-class witch. Even under such circumstances, she was still guaranteed VIP treatment. Hence, a room was arranged for her at a nearby luxury hotel instead of having her spend the night at MPD headquarters.

However, Asya did not sleep. She only sat in front of the table without moving an inch.

On the table was a cellphone. Asya had been staring at it for a good long while.

"Anyway, I have to score a hit on that dragon first... That's my job—"

She had already received a call from her childhood friend.

For the sake of the decisive battle tomorrow, Asya was currently focusing her mind so as to bring out her inborn aggression completely. Singlemindedly, she wished to make herself more ferocious and greedy.

Time elapsed again. The date changed. Late night passed away, second by second, minute by minute.

Then just as the rosy glow of dawn started to color the eastern sky...

"It's almost time..."

Driving the station wagon, Hal was moving along Koushuu Route in the direction of Sasatsuka.

Sitting in the back seat were Orihime and Hazumi. Both girls were wearing their school uniforms, predominantly white, their expressions tense from nervousness.

Hinokagutsuchi's absence was nothing uncommon, so Hal did not let that worry him.

Soon after, Hal's group arrived at Shinjuku Fukutoshin.

Old Tokyo's city hall could be seen up ahead. Standing 243m tall, the massive U-shaped forty-eight-story building was highly conspicuous even amidst the forest of high-rise buildings in Fukutoshin.

Was it going to be Pavel Galad? Or Hal and his friends?

This historical landmark could very well end up as a tombstone for one of the two sides.

Chapter 6 - Sword or Bow

Part 1

The location was in front of the former Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly, in a corner of western Shinjuku. In addition, what used to be Tokyo Metropolitan Main building No.1 was one block away. Hal and Hazumi were bathed under the morning glow together.

The girl next to him clearly had a stiff expression. Hal could not help but speak to her.

"Actually, I don't want you to accompany me on such a dangerous task..."

"No, not at all, please allow me to come along. Minadzuki should be protecting me."

Hazumi looked extremely nervous but she still insisted firmly.

"U-Umm, if the battle goes well, I-I'd like to ask you for a favor..."

"I'll accept it no matter what you ask, but can you save that for later?"

Hazumi instantly stopped talking. She noticed it too.

Over in the eastern sky that had been dyed pink by the rays of dawn, there was a black dot. And it was expanding nonstop. It was the shadow of the dragon flying towards them.

"Successor of the Bow, thank you for waiting!"

Pavel Galad descended, accompanied by his energetic and beautiful voice.

Instantly, the ground shook from the impact. Hal and Hazumi almost lost balance.

"I didn't wait for long. In truth, I only just arrived."

Hal shielded the nervous Hazumi behind his back.

His throat was parched from nervousness as before. His heart was also pounding like a drum. Even so, Hal still reminded himself not to forget to speak in his usual tone of voice, as much as possible.

The silver-white dragon was standing very straight at a crossroad ten-odd meters away.

"I will listen if you have any words before the battle."

"No, I've got nothing to say. By this point, what benefit is there in wasting more effort on words?"

The dragonslaying sword appeared in Pavel Galad's right hand. In preparation for battle, Hal summoned the magic gun of steel and gold into his right hand as well. Both sides had prepared by materializing their respective "wands."

Then Pavel raised his sword up high.

"O secret runes of Ruruk Soun, purify this land with an explosive baptism!"

Five magic symbols manifested over the silver-white head.

The arrangement of "heat and explosion"! Just as Hal rapidly deployed imperishable protection, his surroundings were instantly engulfed in conflagration with a massive explosion. An attack caused by the runes just now.

"Kyahhhh!"

"Trying to use his sword with magic at the same time huh..."

Hazumi screamed while under the protection of the pearly radiance. On the other hand, Hal muttered to himself.

Even when struck by an attack of Ruruk Soun's magic, imperishable protection remained solid as a mountain and definitely protected the girl

beside him. In fact, Hal only brought her along because he trusted this defense.

Unsure of her sense of control over her "serpent," Hazumi had made the offer on her own.

I'd like to be closer to Minadzuki, which will make it easier for our souls to commune—

Defense-wise, there was nothing to worry about for now. However, flames and wind from the explosion were raging outside the protection. Concrete blocks and metal fragments were flying around. It was almost like a scene from hell.

Hal took a deep breath then pointed his gun's muzzle at the sky—diagonally above.

"So he fled to the sky because even he himself will be swallowed by the explosion..."

Due to the explosion's wind and flames, Hal could not see what was outside at all. However, he could imagine the enemy's location. Thus after firing two shots, Hal felt certainty rise in his heart.

Despite capturing Galad, who had fled to the sky, the two shots just now were deflected by imperishable protection...

Hal was wielding a gun-shaped "wand," in other words, a magic bow in the form of a handgun.

The gun could aim automatically to a certain extent, allowing Hal to know where he ought to shoot.

"Fufufufu... So you have started to grow accustomed to controlling the Bow."

As laughter rose, the explosion's wind and flames finally dissipated.

The asphalt of the road was cracked while street lights were bent. A large part of the former Metropolitan Assembly and the lower floors of office buildings were swept away in the explosion's wake.

As expected, Galad was in the air with his silver wings spread and his entire body enveloped in the light of protection.

Naturally, he was unharmed. Next, the silver dragon's left arm suddenly split open to bleed mercury-colored blood. Thus, the blood fell to the ground.

"I have taken last night as an opportunity to create a new minion. Now that things have come to this, I shall summon my own forces to add splendor to the battlefield!"

Nine runes of Ruruk Soun appeared over Galad's head and shone radiantly.

A dual arrangement implying "alchemy" and "bestowal of magical power." Instead of turning into molten metal as last time, the mercury-colored blood came together to form a different shape.

A metallic solid instead of a liquid. However, this shape was—

"A T-Rex!?"

Hal exclaimed loudly. He had some impression of Galad's new minion.

It was the most symbolic carnivorous dinosaur from the late Cretaceous Period. However, what had appeared here was just a tyrannosaurus rex's complete skeletal model.

The mercury-colored metal had recreated a T-Rex skeleton perfectly.

The metallic skull opened its jaws, roaring like a living beast.

RAWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWR!

The body, made of bones only, started to move. Walking on the ground on its hind legs, bending down its skeleton of a body, it swung its long tail like a metal chain.

This skeletal model was a metal golem created by alchemical magic.

After all, Pavel Galad was an alchemist specializing in metal transformations and an enchanter who strengthened his creations by bestowing magical power upon them!

"Of course, things do not end here. By my privilege as a Zizou, I summon the winged lizards of Jabones from the realm of the sky!"

Galad swung the dragonslaying sword at the air above him while shouting at the same time.

Immediately, dozens of shooting stars descended from the sky. Hal had seen this scene many times before, the summoning of lesser dragons, Raptors, by elites.

This time, there were roughly forty of them. This many Raptors were descending at the same time, flying at maximum speed just for the sake of slaughtering tiny Haruga Haruomi.

Then the T-Rex's metallic skeleton finally started to sprint.

Needless to say, it was running towards Hal and Hazumi, of course. The ensuing impact was astounding, causing them to fall on their bottoms. This was because the T-Rex had collided into them in spite of the deployed protection of imperishability.

"Kyahhh!"

"Uwah!"

Hazumi and Hal were unharmed. They immediately stood up. However, the T-Rex skeleton was climbing over the pearly protective shield, biting down with its massive jaws!

However, the protection remained. Unlike last time when struck by the dragonslaying sword, Hal did not feel any pain in his heart.

Against attacks not powered by dragonbane, perhaps imperishable protection really was absolutely inviolable.

"But the enemy isn't kind enough to fight unarmed... Anyway, the next part seems to be key."

"Y-Yes. I will try my very best...!"

Hazumi replied bravely and spoke to their comrade that was watching the battle from a distance.

"Akuro-Ou — Come and help us now!"

Words of summoning. Immediately, a white silhouette came running over. It was the nine-tailed fox-wolf, Akuro-Ou.

Dashing rapidly, Akuro-Ou used her momentum to collide into the T-Rex skeleton. Hassling Hal's protection relentlessly, the monster was blown away!

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Akuro-Ou roared with fighting spirit in abundance. Meanwhile, the forty-something Raptors finally flooded the sky. But just at that moment...

Hazumi, who had been shielded behind Hal so far, stepped forward and cried out in an adorable voice:

"Respond to my voice, Minadzuki!"

New words of summoning. Hazumi closed her eyes and clasped her hands together as though in prayer.

A glowing pentagram appeared in the air above then turned into an infinity symbol before transforming into the emerald leviathan whose form was a serpentine dragon. The reborn Minadzuki materialized.

Raaaaaaaaa raaaaaaaaa raaaaaaaaaaaaa...

Minadzuki called out as though singing a song, spreading her pair of wings at the same time.

Shining with golden brilliance, the wings had sprouted from Minadzuki's back. In the past, Minadzuki's right forelimb and four claws had served as her horn counterpart and were unusually long, but now, they had shrunk.

Currently, Minadzuki's left and right forelimbs were equally long.

Raaaaaaaaa raaaaaaaaa raaaaaaaaaaaaa...

When Minadzuki sang again, the Raptors rapidly descending to the ground suddenly halted. Then as though losing their bearing, they rushed about randomly in the air above Shinjuku Fukutoshin.

The forty-odd Raptors seemed quite afraid of Minadzuki.

"Successor of the Bow, you are human and yet you employ the kin of dragons to do your bidding?"

In contrast, their master, Pavel Galad, remained confident and composed.

Despite seeing two leviathans show up, he only focused his attention on Hal alone. He even said the following:

"Fufufufu. Indeed, battles cannot be limited to weapons and runes alone. As seekers of the dragon king's throne, we successors are obliged to lead armies and exhibit our talent as generals!"

"That's really not my intention at all..."

Starting now was the key moment. Galad seemed to think so too.

While sighing in response to his opponent's unchanging temperament of hot blood, Hal glared at the silver dragon.

Part 2

Created using alchemical magic, the T-Rex skeleton was roughly the same size as Akuro-Ou.

However, its standing and running postures were completely different. Akuro-Ou would run along the ground on four legs like a fox or a wolf. In contrast, the T-Rex had pitifully short front limbs and relied only on its tough and well-developed hind legs to walk.

However, both were equal in speed.

Possibly due to her quadrupedal movement, Akuro-Ou was more agile, but the T-Rex held the upper hand in strength.

Right now, the T-Rex was charging with reckless abandon, trying to bite its opponent. Fortunately, Akuro-Ou dodged in the nick of time.



As a result, the T-Rex smashed into a building, pulverizing a wall of steel-reinforced concrete.

"Akuro-Ou! Try not to stand directly in front of the enemy!"

Acting separately from her cousin and Hal, Orihime issued orders to her partner.

The white fox-wolf was facing off against the dinosaur skeleton specimen next to the former Metropolitan Assembly. Both sides had moved to this place while fighting. A slight distance away, Orihime was watching the battle from a sidewalk.

"My minions."

Meanwhile, Pavel Galad was majestically overlooking the battlefield from the air above the former National Diet Building.

Furthermore, his dragon scales were glowing with sacred silver-white light, causing his appearance to brim with solemnity.

"As the successor to the dragonslaying sword, I shall try a dragonbane technique. I entrust this sword's sharpness to you all—Turn into my blades!"

Galad raised the dragonslaying sword up high, pointing the blade at the sky.

Then everything he summoned became enveloped in platinum-colored flames.

Whether the T-Rex skeleton facing off against Akuro-Ou or the Raptors in the sky, flying aimlessly in disarray ever since Minadzuki made her appearance—

The flames disappeared within seconds. In return, the Rune of the Sword appeared on forehead of the T-Rex's skull.

Next, the tip of its tail took on the shape of a cutting edge, resulting in a longsword's blade!

"Arming up with a sword, so that's what's going on..."

Orihime suddenly gasped. Her side was going to meet defeat unless they pulled out a weapon too.

In that case—Orihime pressed her left hand upon her voluptuous bosom.

Last night, this hand had obtained the mark of a rune, accompanied by an unexpected shock. At the time, he had something like that, causing her heart to race inexplicably. Even now, her heart was still pounding nonstop.

Unable to accept these feelings, Orihime frowned.

After all, he was a weirdo. In addition to being extremely insistent on doing things at his own pace, he was flawed in sociability.

Furthermore, they had not known each other for long. The girl whom Orihime had recently made friends with also seemed to be in love with him. However, clearly contrary to his usual style, this boy would often engage in inexplicable heroics.

That was the case yesterday as well as last time when he acted as a diversion to lead an elite dragon away—

"N-No. Never mind this, I must concentrate right now!"

Orihime shook her head forcefully and chastised herself.

"Haruga-kun, entrust the rune's power to me too. Please...!"

Logically speaking, her voice could not possibly reach his ears. However, the magical bond would surely transmit the message to him.

Sure enough, the Rune of the Bow appeared on the back of her left hand, then on Akuro-Ou's nine tails. A black arrowhead manifested near the tip of each tail.

These were stone arrowheads formed from a sharpened material resembling obsidian.

The nine arrowheads were all hovering in midair, their sharp tips aimed at the T-Rex skeleton.

"Very well... Let us decide the match, fair and square!"

Like the enemy's Sword, these arrowheads were enchanted weapons and also the Bow that Akuro-Ou had obtained.

At the same time, Hal and Hazumi were preparing to launch a fast assault.

The forty or so Raptors were originally wandering the sky aimlessly in fear of Minadzuki. However, they were now enveloped in platinum-colored flames.

"This is bad. Can you defeat them before the Sword's rune strengthens them?"

"V-Very well. I will try and ask Minadzuki!"

Hazumi clasped her hands together, looked at her partner in the sky and began to pray.

During this time, Hal randomly chose a Raptor as a target and aimed the magic gun at it.

The Raptor was flying roughly a hundred meters above in the air. It was not a range one could snipe using a handgun. Nevertheless, Hal still shot without concern. With the ejection of an empty shell from the handgun, a red bullet of light flew into the sky at the same time.

The excessively sloppy shot from the dragonslaying gun was slightly off target.

Although at first glance, it looked like the bullet would only graze the Raptor that was burning with platinum-colored flames—along the way, the bullet corrected its trajectory to strike the enemy directly. Thus, the bullet of light pierced its prey's heart.

"Sure enough, rather than a gun, it'd be better to call it an outrageous magic projectile."

Hal muttered while watching the Raptor crash somewhere in the wasteland.

An exclusive weapon that only Haruga Haruomi could operate freely. As the one who facilitated its birth, he ought to feel satisfied with such a perfect result. However, the one issue of remaining ammunition troubled him.

"Take as much of my power as you need... Hence, Minadzuki, I am counting on you!"

At this moment, Hazumi cried out. Then Minadzuki responded to her call.

Having obtained a pair of golden wings, the leviathan in the form of a serpentine dragon was originally overhead protecting Hal and Hazumi like a guardian deity, but now, she spread her wings wide.

In addition, a white orb appeared in the palm of her right front limb, giving off dazzling radiance.

Raaaaaaaaaaaaa... Raaaaaaaaaaaaa...

Minadzuki's singing was heard once more. The voice was reminiscent of a choir's solemn singing of hymns.

However, her voice also carried immense destructive power. While the song spread in the air, Raptors were disintegrating one after another.

It was a scene resembling the collapse of sand sculptures in the wind.

Raptors lost their form without warning, turning into white sand to be carried away by the wind.

"So amazing. I can't believe Minadzuki is capable of doing this..."

"That's the pseudo-divinity of Wind, I guess? But this is really over the top..."

Hazumi and Hal whispered in conversation while listening to the singing.

Raaaaaaaa... Raaaaaaaa... Raaaaaaaaaaaa...

The dozens of Raptors in the air were beginning to disintegrate at the same time.

This was wind—in other words, ultrasonic waves produced from vibrations in the air. And it was strongly directional, allowing Minadzuki to disintegrate only the targeted enemies.

Having obtained new life, Minadzuki's powers had clearly improved greatly from before.

In merely a minute or two after she began singing, close to twenty Raptors had already been destroyed, turned into sand. The remainder would probably get wiped out in the same manner—But just as that thought crossed Hal's mind...

"O secret runes of Ruruk Soun! Grant my minions a brand new form!"

Pavel Galad chanted a mantra.

Four magic symbols were lined up over his head. This arrangement was "metal manipulation." Next, the remaining Raptors all disintegrated and Minadzuki stopped singing.

However, bones flew out of the corpses that had turned to sand then started descending towards the ground.

All bones were the color of dull steel. Like the T-Rex skeleton, these bones were also made of metal.

"Even the Raptors—even the bones of minions can turn into metal too!?"

The contents could be recycled even after defeat. Hal groaned.

Should one feel impressed with the metal specialist and alchemist?
Turned into bone specimens, the Raptors flew in the air and landed.

Furthermore, the tips of their bone-only wings were fitted with dagger blades!

"Minadzuki, protect us!"

Hazumi instantly made her request, prompting Minadzuki to release lightning from the orb in her hand.

However, the targeted Raptor skeleton dodged at the last second and even flew past Minadzuki instead, slicing the emerald serpentine body using the dagger affixed to its right wing.

Kyuahhhhhhhhhh. The leviathan cried out in pain.

"Minadzuki!"

Hazumi screamed loudly too. The bone-only Raptors swarmed towards Hal's imperishable protection. Ten skeletons harassed the shield, using the daggers on their wings to stab the protection repeatedly.

With every stab, Hal's heart would convulse in pain.

"Ku—Urgh."

"H-Haruga-san, are you alright!?"

"C-Compared to me, I'm afraid Minadzuki is probably in much greater pain..."

After answering Hazumi who was worrying about him, Hal pointed his magic gun at the sky.

The remaining Raptor skeletons had surrounded Minadzuki in the air, subjecting her to a flurry of frenzied slashes with the daggers on their wings. At this rate, Hal, Hazumi and her "serpent" were simply going to end up chopped to death together.

"Looks like... I'll need to use a special move now."

Hal made his decision. The magic gun responded with clicking sounds of operation.

Hal pulled the trigger without aiming because it was not needed. In the next instant, all the bullets rushed out the muzzle of the magic gun of steel and gold.

The sky shook from the rumble of consecutive shots, fired at super high speed. The twenty-seven bullets were meant to be emptied in an instant.

Fully automatic fire. This was the mode where bullets would be shot continuously while the trigger was depressed.

If single shots or triple bursts could be considered normal moves in a fighting game, then this was undoubtedly a special move. Twenty-seven bullets of red light chased his targets, flying autonomously all over the sky.

Thanks to that, all Raptor skeletons were instantly shot to death.

Whether those harassing the light of protection or surrounding Minadzuki, all of them were eliminated. Although Hal even wanted to target Galad in the air as well, in the end, he cancelled the notion.

Such fierce firepower was only possible due to firing continuously all at once. Random isolated shots were meaningless.

"The dragonslaying bow you created is truly peculiar."

After his subordinates were eliminated, Galad landed on the ground.

He looked very stately, even giving an impression like the general leading a great army.

"A weapon unknown to dragons... A bow that spits out fiery stones? Magnificently done. You humans have not neglected to advance war research, thus creating new power."

"I think this type of weapon is frequently used against your kind, actually..."

"I stand corrected. My apologies, I never noticed."

It looked like the cannons and missiles fired by mankind so far had failed to catch Galad's eye.

Hal sighed despite his magic gun receiving approval even from a valorous warrior among dragons.

"It's clearly a magic weapon, yet it runs out of bullets..."

While Hal was muttering to himself, the magazine was ejected from the gun's grip.

Having started using the magic gun since yesterday, Hal had pretty much mastered its basic functionality.

He could select between single shots, triple bursts or full auto. The bullet capacity was thirty shots. The magazines were automatically generated by strange magic and reloaded. However, it required several minutes to do so—

Using this amount of bullets for fully automatic fire would mean running out of ammo in an instant.

"I guess I can only rely on this barrier and Minadzuki for the time being..."

Guarded by imperishable protection, Hal and Galad glared at each other amidst their respective glow.

Meanwhile, the underclassman aspiring to become Hal's assistant spoke up, "D-Don't worry. Minadzuki says she can endure!"

"Well actually, I just thought of something annoying."

Indeed, Minadzuki was currently keeping Galad restrained with a proud and threatening pose. Although the serpentine dragon had over ten lacerations distributed over her body, she could still fight.

Galad raised the dragonslaying sword towards Minadzuki in her current state.

"Intervening in a fight between successors would require a soul that refuses to bow down to the might of dragonbane. O imitation, do you have what it takes?"

Minadzuki's entire body suddenly went stiff, immobilized. She had been bound by the dragonslaying weapon.

Akuro-Ou had suffered at Raak Al Soth's hands previously. Ordinary leviathans were unable to resist that sort of pressure.

"Thus, we have plunged into a hopeless crisis..."

Although his choice of words sounded like a joke, Hal's tone was very serious.

Once again, he shielded Hazumi behind him and waited for the enemy to announce his intentions. Rather, that was all he could do.

"Shirasaka, tell Minadzuki to retreat first. She'll get taken out at this rate!"

"Y-Yes! Take a break for a while, Minadzuki!"

Responding to instructions from humans, the serpentine dragon leviathan vanished.

In response, Galad pointed the dragonslaying sword's blade straight at the sky.

"Since you have exhibited a technique of assured annihilation, I must respond with magic of equal standing..."

"So the enemy really has this kind of thing too..."

If the magic gun had a special move, then of course, the dragonslaying sword would have a trump card too.

This was totally logical. While Hal concentrated with bated breath, Galad yelled ferociously.

"O secret runes of Ruruk Soun, lend me the power to bring about annihilation!"

Nineteen magic symbols manifested right next to the sword's blade. This arrangement meant "I summon the thunder god's sword to unsheathe in haste" —

Then the sky was suddenly covered in dark clouds while lightning began to strike the land.

"O dragonslaying sword! Summon lightning from the sky to constitute the thunder god's sword!"

Lightning surrounded the longsword infused with dragonslaying magical power.

Next, the white lightning congealed behind Pavel Galad to form a great serpent.

A serpent of lightning was born. And this serpent continued to absorb lightning falling from the sky, gradually growing in size!

"Fufu, the dragonslaying bow seems to have exhausted its arrows. In that case, I shall summon lightning without fear."

"Yeah, without bullets, I can't stop you either..."

The lightning serpent had grown to a length of a hundred meters.

Hal grumbled while Hazumi gasped in suffering. Could imperishable protection withstand the "thunder god's sword" used by Galad? Probably not was Hal's conclusion.

He glanced at the magic gun. The magazine had not reloaded yet.

In that case, he could only rely on aid from comrades—

Galad's minion, the T-Rex skeleton.

After fitting a dragonslaying sword on its tail bone, it instantly became several times more dangerous because the chain-like tail was swinging with speed and agility rivaling a master swordsman, controlling the longsword splendidly.

Even a kendo practitioner such as Orihime was feeling impressed by the fierce swordsmanship.

"Hurry and dodge, Akuro-Ou!"

Despite her command, even the nimble Akuro-Ou could not evade entirely.

It happened again. Despite jumping back to dodge the T-Rex skeleton's sword in a horizontal sweep of its tail, Akuro-Ou suffered a slight cut in the area of her right shoulder. Some of Akuro-Ou's white fur fell on the asphalt road surface.

"We should use a weapon too—Use that Bow!"

Nine black arrowheads were hovering at the tips of Akuro-Ou's nine tails.

One arrowhead's tip fired a red flash of light akin to an arrow. Struck by the flash, the T-Rex skeleton was blown away, tilting backwards, but not to the point of falling over.

Despite a dent in the ribs area, it continued to move with agility.

Rushing into point blank range in front of Akuro-Ou's chest, the skeleton swung the longsword on its tail.

"So resilient... Is this also thanks to the Rune of the Sword?"

A tough opponent as expected. Orihime did not know if the vassal covenant was the reason, but she spontaneously learned how to use the Rune of the Bow. She even sensed that she could achieve total victory just by using a trump card.

Because vassals were able to use special moves too—In the case of Haruga Haruomi's magic gun, it was fully automatic fire.

"Fire magic... I've already used pseudo-divinity once, which means I can't be too wasteful with it. But right now, it would be best to be more decisive."

Akuro-Ou was currently dodging sword attacks using a quadrupedal beast's agility.

But judging from the enemy's skill with the sword, it would come as no surprise if Akuro-Ou's defenses were to fall any moment.

"Akuro-Ou, blow that thing away with massive flames!"

Orihime commanded with determination.

The black arrowheads on the tips of Akuro-Ou's nine tails glowed, releasing flames at the same time. The nine flames swallowed the T-Rex skeleton.

Her next instruction was to attack continuously while magical power from divinity lasted, using the same principle as fully automatic fire—

Orihime intended to shoot flames nonstop until the metal skeleton was incinerated to nothing.

This went on for dozens of seconds. Inside the flames, the T-Rex sank to its knees. Its front limbs fell off its body while it fell over forwards. But not long after she felt certain of victory, Orihime was suddenly stunned.

"Ehhh!?"

The skull of the T-Rex skeleton flew out of the flames.

More precisely, it was the skull with the spine, together with the attached tail and the longsword—Orihime understood. This skeleton was not living to begin with. Instead, it was an imitation lifeform created by magic.

Even if the absurd phenomenon of a skull and spine moving on its own would be nothing to be surprised about!

"Akuro-Ou!?"

The T-Rex skeleton bit the white fox-wolf fiercely in the left shoulder. In such a state, it even swung its tail bone with lightning speed, producing a flash of the sword.

Such aggressive swordsmanship. This attack severed one of the nine tails.

Kuohhhhhhhhh!

Akuro-Ou screamed in pain but her eyes continued to burn with fighting spirit!

"We'll strike back, Akuro-Ou!"

Orihime yelled. Likewise, the enemy was within close combat range.

Akuro-Ou lifted a tail. Long to begin with, the tail stretched further like rubber, delivering a devastating blow to the T-Rex's skull like a left hook from a human boxer.

Things did not end with just one attack. The remaining seven tails launched seven hooks in succession!

Unable to withstand the attacks, the T-Rex skeleton tilted back.

Then its jaws loosened, thus freeing Akuro-Ou. The white fox-wolf immediately lifted her head and bit the T-Rex's neck—or rather, its neck bone—sinking her fangs deeply!

"Release hot breath just like that!"

A breath attack released while biting the enemy, pouring all destructive power into the enemy's body.

Asya had used the same tactic before. Akuro-Ou immediately discharged a heat beam, scorching the T-Rex skeleton's neck bone like a burner.

Seeing that the resilient skeleton specimen had finally stopped moving, Orihime breathed a sigh of relief.

"Phew..."

However, there was no time to rest.

By the time anyone noticed, the sky was filled with dark clouds while lightning descended repeatedly.

Orihime looked towards the Diet Building, only to see Pavel Galad raising the dragonslaying sword up high. Then a gigantic lightning serpent appeared behind me, raising its scythe-like neck.

The lightning serpent's head was almost as tall as the roof of a nearby high-rise building!

"Hurry, Akuro-Ou! Go and help Hazumi and Haruga-kun!"

The instant Orihime yelled, Pavel Galad swung his dragonslaying sword downwards.

Enveloped in lightning, the blade attacked the protection guarding Haruga Haruomi and her cousin. At first glance, the pearly radiance managed to withstand the sword strike, but...

The long and stout lightning serpent's lower jaw descended like lightning together with the sword.

CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAASH!

The rumbling resounded across the sky. The immense lightning released light that dyed western Shinjuku white.

"Wahhhhhhhhhh!"

Haruga Haruomi proceeded to scream inside his imperishable protection.

Then he fell over forwards. Although he seemed unharmed from a distance, the lightning slash just now seemed to carry a mysterious power that inflicted a severe blow to him. Lying on the ground, his body was shaking slightly as though electrically shocked. He also seemed unconscious.

"H-Haruga-san!"

Hazumi cried out from beside him. Orihime's cousin was safe and sound, but the imperishable protection guarding the pair had vanished. Was it because Haruomi fainted?

"Akuro-Ou!"

She must not let her cousin and friend die. Despite feeling her heart invaded by despair, Orihime still urged Akuro-Ou to take action. Just at that moment —

A giant blue shadow descended rapidly from the distant sky above, accompanied by supersonic shockwaves.

Part 3

"Still, for a foreign helper to arrive in Japan on the day of the battle, that's far too last minute."

"On the other hand, do note that she is a powerful master-class witch. Cut the grumbling when the Trans-Pacific's most powerful ace has agreed to come over."

On the final morning of the deadline period set by the silver-white elite dragon, two members of SAURU's Kantou branch were having this conversation.

Kenjou Genya was full of complaints while his boss, Hiiragi Yukari answered him.

They were currently at a hotel lobby, sitting on a sofa, having coffee.

"The Trans-Pacific's ace... In other words—"

"Yes, the one whom Asya-san knows."

"Isn't she the veritable Shootdown Ace as well as an executive in the organization? I'm impressed that you were able to hire someone of this caliber."

"Actually—I can't claim the credit. Because dragons have showed up in Japan unusually frequently these past few months, she had already made plans to visit Japan to carry out an investigation."

"Even so, it's still something to celebrate."

Kenjou rubbed his bearded chin and whispered. His suit was heavily wrinkled, looking even more uncouth than usual, presumably because he had been busy with the elite dragon incident these past few days.

"She is expected to land in Haneda Airport at 10am via a special plane prepared by the American military."

"Understood. By the way, is Europe's former Shootdown Ace still not ready?"

"Should be soon? She apparently woke up in hunger at five or six this morning."

This hotel was where Asya Rubashvili was staying.

Kenjou and Yukari had come here early in the morning to pick her up, holding a meeting while having breakfast. At this moment, a member of the hotel's front desk staff came over to them, carrying a cute yet solemn brown envelop on a tray.

Yukari took the envelop and read the contents. It was a letter.

"It's common for master-class witches to ignore collaborative relationships and take action on their own... But this is really too sudden."

Written concisely, the letter explained that the battle had to start ahead of time due to tactical reasons. In addition, there was also a brief note that Orihime and Akuro-Ou had been rescued, but without details.

This unexpected development caused Yukari to frown.

Asya entered Old Tokyo before daybreak. Instead of meeting with her comrades, she went to western Shinjuku on her own first then silently observed the battle flow.

Late last night, she had already discussed battle preparations over a satellite phone.

"Haruomi seemed inexplicably thrilled yesterday... His voice sounded a bit excited."

An hour before the date changed at midnight, she had received a call from Haruomi. But after the conversation, the subtle sense of dissonance was arousing Asya's suspicions.

(Haruga Haruomi's emotional changes were caused by the unexpected accident during Orihime's bath, but of course, there was no way for Asya to know.)

Regardless, the problem at hand was the showdown against Pavel Galad.

Asya looked at the back of her left hand, where the Rune of the Bow was currently visible. The Rune of the Bow would naturally appear to accompany heightened intent to fight dragons. Then she looked down at the world below.

Asya's current location was a roof of some building near the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building—

Holding binoculars, she watched the battlefield and wasteland of western Shinjuku from the edge.

"It's about time to enter the fray..."

She had been told that her childhood friend could now use the Rune of the Bow skillfully.

Presumably due to this, Asya also felt fully confident. She was convinced that she could use that rune of Ruruk Soun even more viciously. By applying the rune's power to a "gun" framework, it became easier to control.

As she was right now — She could do it! With unshakable confidence, Asya watched the battle before her eyes.

Pavel Galad finally swung down the most powerful blade strike.

The lightning serpent also lifted its head and twisted its long and stout body. Seeing that, Asya nodded. The instant Galad was about to swing his sword, she summoned her partner.

"O ancient divine seal of purity, send the transient blue dragon to the ground!"

Amidst the dark thunderclouds in the sky above, a light shone. Right now, the pentagram was probably transforming in an infinity symbol inside the clouds, then turning into a blue wyvern.

"Rushalka, get it done in one go."

In fact, there was the option of sniping from the stratosphere but Asya did not choose that approach.

To obtain far greater destructive power, she launched a double attack.

"Use pseudo-divinity to change forms. Begin to accelerate!"

The injured "serpent" responded to her covanantee's orders with a roar.

Kyuahhhhhhhh!

In the next instant, Rushalka flew out from the thunderclouds.

But instead of moving towards the ground, she flew higher up in the sky. Her body exhibited blue transparency.

Water—She had invoked pseudo-divinity to turn her body into a mass of water.

In this manner, Rushalka began to accelerate and descend. Flying above the thunderclouds was for securing the necessary distance for acceleration.

Accelerating nonstop, she finally broke the sound barrier.

A living body of flesh could not withstand this level of acceleration, but as a wyvern-shaped mass of water, it was a different matter. The mass of water, measured in tons, released shockwaves while descending rapidly at supersonic speed. Then she crashed violently into Pavel Galad's back.



Indeed, she crashed into the dragon who was about to chop Haruomi with the most powerful and biggest slash.

When swinging his thunder god's sword, his back and wings were exposed and completely unguarded.

Rushalka crashed violently there. A thunderous roar, impact and explosive wind ensued—

"Nu, ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

Despite getting struck in the back by Rushalka's supersonic charge, Galad still withstood it.

Keeping him unscathed in spite of such a hit, imperishable protection was truly terrifying. However, the protection could not dissipate the pressure from the supersonic collision. The silver dragon's gigantic body was sent flying in an instant.

Together with Rushalka, he rolled towards a certain high-rise building's spacious parking lot.

However, Asya's blue partner immediately stood up, prepared to fight.

"Rushalka, use pseudo-divinity to attack—Ice Storm!"

The real attack was next. Asya immediately issued orders.

Rushalka dispelled her transformation, returning to a wyvern's physical body as usual. Furthermore, dozens of white arrowheads of stone appeared behind her.

An enchanted weapon similar in appearance to Akuro-Ou's arrowheads, this was Rushalka's "Bow."

"Also use the rune's magical power for full burst!"

Asya ordered Rushalka to perform what was equivalent to the full auto attack of Haruomi's magic gun.

Dozens of white arrowheads flew towards the dragon. However, they rushed about in a flurry to generate a tornado instead of striking directly.

An ice tornado with ice, snow and cold air in a swirling vortex.

The arrowhead's tips repeatedly fired blue-white flashes of light at Galad in the center of the tornado.

These were dragonslaying lasers that could puncture even elite dragons. The lasers attacked Pavel Galad from all directions like fully automatic gunfire from heavy machine guns.

"O blue imitation, I was thinking you would make your appearance sooner or later..."

Bathed in the full burst attack of ice, Galad groaned.

He was unharmed thanks to imperishable protection. However, he was down on one knee with his left hand clutching his chest. Just as Asya had heard from Haruomi, his heartmetal was currently under immense strain.

In that state, it should be difficult for him to counterattack. But in spite of that, Galad still roared ferociously.

"Do you think I would not make preparations for an ambush!?"

"A rune of Ruruk Soun!?"

A magic symbol appeared in front of Galad.

A rune implying "swift execution of instructions." Watching the battle from a rooftop, Asya jumped in surprise. Galad was not holding the dragonslaying sword in his hand!

By the time she noticed, the sword had floated up into the air. It was also accompanied by white lightning.

Next, the dragonslaying sword turned into the thunder god's sword and flew rapidly at Rushalka!

"Akuro-Ou!"

However, the white fox-wolf rushed out, guided by Orihime's voice.

Indeed, she rushed to Rushalka's side. At the last moment, Akuro-Ou curled one of her extended tails around Asya's partner and dragged her away.

Consequently, the dragonslaying sword missed its target and stabbed into the ground instead...

"In that case!"

This time, Galad opened his jaws wide and expelled blue-white flames.

Naturally, the conflagration's target was Rushalka. Unless Asya invoked pseudo-divinity to defend, her partner would face certain death—

However, what came out of Asya's mouth were completely opposite instructions.

"Rushalka, using the pseudo-divinity you're currently using—Perform a Double Cast!"

Ignoring the advice of rationality, Asya followed instinct to abandon defense.

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! The blue wyvern howled. Repeatedly launching attacks from the arrowheads and pseudo-divinity, she further strengthened the barrage of blue-white lasers.

"Ooh—Gahhhhh!"

Asya felt entirely drained of strength. Her body felt as cold as ice.

These symptoms resembled anemia. Witches would suffer from frightening consumption when performing a Double Cast of pseudo-divinity. Control of the "serpent" also became difficult.

Even so, Asya still gritted her teeth and forced herself to sustain the full burst attack.

The frontal showdown between the flames and the laser barrage ended in a draw.

"Gahhhhhhh!"

Galad roared loudly and collapsed. The pearly radiance vanished suddenly while lasers descending from all directions viciously sliced his gigantic silver-white body.

However, Rushalka also fell down with a cry of "kyuahhhhhhhhhhh!"

With both sides collapsing on the ground, the lasers, blizzard and conflagration all vanished.

"Rushalka!"

Spurring her staggering body, Asya made her way to the roof's exit.

"A-Are you really alright? Haruga-san!?"

"Yeah, well enough... Urgh. How many minutes was my heart actually stopped...?"

Back when Pavel Galad had swung the thunder god's sword...

Despite withstanding the direct strike from the sword itself, the massive lightning had severely damaged the imperishable protection, causing its user, Hal, to collapse from cardiac paralysis.

Even so, he was still hazily conscious and did not faint. This was truly absurd.

Having witnessed everything at close range, Hazumi cried and ran over to hug him tightly. But during this time, Hal was still able to watch the entire process with glazed eyes despite his immobile body.

Once he was finally capable of speaking, he opened his mouth to comfort Hazumi.

"B-Because you stopped breathing all this time, I thought it was over for you—"

"Me too. I'm surprised I survived..."

Under Hazumi's tearful gaze, Hal finally got up.

Meanwhile, the silver-white dragon and the blue wyvern were collapsed on the ground. Asya had come to Hal's aid the moment before he was going to be struck by a fatal blow.

"It was worth being bait to serve retribution to that Galad..."

Hal exhaled in relief because the plan went off without a hitch.

Using the most durable unit to lure the enemy away first, then flanking the enemy using units with excellent mobility and striking power to ambush, surround and attack the enemy's side and back—These were tactics that humans had already developed since the time of the ancient Greeks and reportedly put to good use by Alexander the Great and Hannibal, the famed Carthaginian general.

Usually in ancient times, infantry was used as bait while cavalry forces were in charge of assault.

"The protection is clearly more durable than 'serpents' after all, so I guess this is playing to strengths... But it's really bad for the heart, in various ways..."

"Yes... My lifespan has been shortened too..."

Having shared the role as bait, Hazumi nodded as well.

It was truly wonderful that she was safe and sound. Hal thought that from the bottom of his heart and exhaled deeply.

Then driven by a certain sense of premonition, he turned his gaze to the enemy. During the battle just now, Rushalka was knocked out completely. But the other side was about to push up his upper body now.

Next to Hal, Hazumi gasped "!"

Indeed, Pavel Galad was gradually recovering like Hal.

Part 4

"Akuro-Ou! Use the Bow again with fire magic!"

Seeing Pavel Galad still surviving, Orihime swiftly issued orders. Acting separately from Hal's group, she was currently running towards them.

Responding to Orihime's command, Akuro-Ou's Bow, namely, the nine arrowheads, released flames at the same time.

"Nu, guohhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Swallowed by the vortex of nine flames, Galad suffered in pain.

The pearly light—imperishable protection—was defending him, but it had become very dim, almost about to vanish. At this moment, Hal made a discovery.

Due to Rushalka's attack weakening his heart, or equivalently, his heartmetal, it had also diminished the protection's power.

But before the pearly light disappeared completely, Galad pounced towards Akuro-Ou.

And his right hand was wielding the dragonslaying sword he had called back!

"Flames of this level cannot burn me to death!"

Shouting valorously, he raised the dragonslaying sword for a downward swing. His target was Akuro-Ou's head. The white fox-wolf

barely dodged but her left shoulder—the base of her front limb—was slashed viciously.

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Akuro-Ou screamed in pain. Galad used this opportunity to swing his long tail as a dragon, pummeling the fox-wolf's body with a horizontal blow like using a log.

Then when his opponent shrank back as a result, he made a forward thrust with his sword.

The blade brushed past Akuro-Ou's neck. Red blood splattered out.

Next, Galad spewed out blue-white flames to burn the white fox-wolf's entire body. Burning and burning, he tried to burn his target to oblivion.

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

"Disappear for now, Akuro-Ou! You'll die at this rate...!"

The fox-wolf's gigantic body vanished from the earth at Orihime's command.

Galad ended the discharge of flames then turned his eyes, filled with fighting spirit—to Hal on the ground.

"Successor of the Bow, we have both lost subordinates and now it is finally time for a one-on-one duel. How elating."

"I don't share that kind of mood. Get lost."

While cursing his enemy, Hal mentally thanked Orihime and Akuro-Ou.

Thanks to them, he had made it in the nick of time. With a mechanical click, the magic gun's magazine was finally reloaded. Hal immediately started shooting.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Galad had escaped in the air. The bullets missed their mark.

However, the three bullets of red light chased after the target that was rising in the air. This was homing functionality resembling that of air-to-air missiles.

"Fufu, the Bow is truly hard to handle without protection!"

In contrast to what he was saying, Galad's voice was filled with joy.

The silver dragon swerved in flight to disrupt the homing bullets while raising an index finger from his dragon hand. On that fingertip, a magic symbol was flashing brightly.

"O rune of Ruruk Soun, grant me more powerful wings!"

The gigantic silver body accelerated dramatically, instantly leaving western Shinjuku's sky.

"S-So this is the magic of High-Speed Flight...?"

Asya's voice. Panting heavily, she was approaching. Spurring her body that had been severely drained by Double Casting, she was running over here.

"He couldn't possibly have fled. Is he planning to withdraw temporarily and regroup?"

"It's called protection, right? How long does it take to recover?"

"Hmm... Well."

Hal stared at his magic gun, the gun-shaped "magic wand."

It was a guide to controlling the power of dragonbane. Whenever Hal wanted to learn about the Rune of the Bow's powers, it would provide him with instinctive understanding. Hal had taken action after becoming aware of this.

"A full recovery after giving the heart half a day's rest, apparently."

"In that case, we have to end things here. Considering that dragon's personality —"

"He'll likely return immediately. But it would be great if he had fled for real."

Hal nodded and agreed with Asya's speculation. Then he said, "Everyone, I will try fighting alone for the next part."

"Haruga-kun!?" "Haruga-san!?"

"Indeed, that might be for the best..."

In contrast to the surprised Orihime and Hazumi, Asya was the only one who nodded in agreement.

"Our 'serpents' have already reached their limits. Given the current situation, it's very hard for us to support Haruomi. Fighting alone might turn out to be easier."

Hal smiled wryly. As expected of the childhood friend, bound to him by rotten fate. It was great that they reached consensus so quickly.

"B-But my Minadzuki can still move!"

"She gets frozen just from the sight of the sword, right?"

That was Hal's reply to Hazumi's protest. Judging from the fact that Rushalka and Akuro-Ou were fine in this regard, establishing a vassal covenant probably conferred the ability to withstand it.

However, Minadzuki had not been involved with that covenant.

"Haruga-kun..."

"I have no intention of dying or committing suicide, so don't worry, Juujouji. Also —"

Confronted with Orihime who was unsure whether she should stop him or encourage him, Hal said, "Starting last night, I've felt that my luck has

been riding on a peak. What happened last night was definitely more effective than praying to a goddess of fortune."

"W-Wait, what are you referring to by 'what happened'—!?"

"Anyway, that's that. I'll be back."

Finishing in as relaxed a tone as possible, Hal turned his back to the witches.

He decided to advance towards the north side of the former Metropolitan Government Building first. Concentrated there were luxury hotels, university hospitals, etc.

Indulging himself in a sense of martyrdom while heading to his death, that was totally behavior unlike himself. Besides, he had no interest of that sort. Hal hoped as much as possible to stick to his usual attitude.

Even so, he still could not help but run uncontrollably.

"Orihime-san, we still have things to try."

Hearing what Asya said, Orihime jumped in fright, because she had sunk into deep thought while staring at Haruga Haruomi's back as he left.

"W-What kind of plan do you have?"

"Let's talk about the details while we walk. We need to hurry over to Rushalka."

The senior witch's gaze was cast towards her partner who was all covered in wounds. The blue wyvern was lying on the asphalt, collapsed in exhaustion.

Her body was not in peak condition to begin with. Then there was overuse of pseudo-divinity and Pavel Galad's flames.

The combined effect of these factors had pushed Rushalka to the limit. However, Asya seemed like she still intended to have Rushalka do something. For the sake of victory, such mercilessness was surely necessary —

As a swordswoman with nation-wide renown, Orihime nodded strongly.

"...Yes. Boys resembling the Black Ranger or the Blue Ranger shouldn't be my cup of tea, but this no longer matters now..."

To hide the worry in her heart when watching Hal leave, Orihime whispered softly.

"? Orihime-san, did you just say something?"

"N-No, nothing!"

"The same goes for you, Hazumi-san. Even if Minadzuki can't fight the enemy directly, there might still be things she could do."

"Y-Yes. Please give the order no matter what it is!"

Hazumi answered with strong morale in response to Asya. The cousin with the quiet personality was showing a dignified and determined countenance in a rare display.

The battle was not over yet. The three girls hurried over to the "serpent" that was collapsed on the ground.

Hal sneaked into a certain office building's top floor.

With only eight floors, it was definitely no high-rise building. Climbing sixty floors or something when elevators were not in service? Hal would never do that.

"But trying to snipe through a building's ceiling is pretty absurd too."

This floor seemed like it used to be some sort of company. While lying on what appeared to be the reception sofa, Hal toyed with the magic gun of steel and gold in his right hand.

If Galad flew towards Hal, Hal would fire his gun to snipe him—This was fairly simple as a plan.

Hal was relying on the magic gun's firepower and ability to search for the enemy. Shooting through the ceiling was not a problem. Capturing the enemy, who was out of sight, to launch a sniping attack did not count as hard either.

"What's next is to see which of us can land a preemptive strike..."

Galad was probably going to use investigative magic to target Hal who was out of sight.

Whose ability to search the enemy was stronger—Unknown so far. Impossible to predict.

This was a gamble. Hal only had one source of hope. Last time, Raak Al Soth did not have an easy time locating Hal after losing his trail. Conversely, the magic gun of steel and gold allowed Hal to effortlessly locate Galad even when out of sight...

"But this alone would be totally unreliable."

Hal felt his shirt pocket to confirm the pocket watch's tactile sensation.

This was the Clockwork Mage that he had just used to perform magic. Hal had used Sound Suppression, Visual Interference, Olfactory Nullification as well as Enemy Search magic together.

Having exhausted all methods at his disposal, Hal was currently waiting for his gamble to bear fruit.

"I hope fortune will favor me..."

The instant he whispered, Hal felt the enemy's presence.

He closed his eyes. Thanks to Enemy Search magic working in conjunction with the magic gun, his senses were even sharper than when his vision was obscured by explosive flames.

Pavel Galad's massive body was flying back and forth at high speed over western Shinjuku.

He was probably swerving greatly as a precaution against Hal's long-distance shooting.

He was currently trying to disrupt Hal's aim. Stalling for time in this manner so as to seek out the location where Hal was hiding...

However, given this level of speed and aerial mobility—Hal pointed his magic gun at the ceiling.

Some elite dragons were able to survive even when their heads were destroyed.

Hence, Hal aimed for the chest. This was to pierce a dragon's greatest vulnerability, the heartmetal.

While lying on the sofa, Hal proceeded to pull the trigger thrice in succession. Three bullets of red light were shot from the muzzle, opening a large hole in the building's ceiling before flying out.

Then the bullets struck their target. All three shots had hit. That was the feeling Hal received.

"I won...?"

For an instant, Hal felt troubled by his inability to confirm victory.

The target suddenly accelerated to descend towards the ground. And straight towards him, rapidly descending towards the top of the building where Hal was hiding. Hal instantly deployed imperishable protection.

Next, a thunderous crash resounded in all directions.

The building's ceiling easily collapsed with a large amount of rubble falling down. When the blue sky and the silver dragon's massive body appeared before his eyes, blue-white flames instantly surged into the Hal's floor.

"Wahhhhhhh!"

Thanks to protection, Hal was unhurt. However, he was buried alive by the collapsed ceiling. Debris of varying sizes was piled on top of the pearly light. Apart from that, he could not see anything.

And the light of protection was about to vanish.

Hal's heart had taken quite a lot of damage too. He immediately raised the magic gun to fire in triple burst mode.

The surrounding debris was blown away in one go, clearing out his field of vision.

The blue sky and Galad's gigantic body, hovering motionlessly in the air, entered his view. Galad had pulled back slightly from the building, holding the dragonslaying sword in one hand. Despite clearly being a dragon, he was using a fencing pose.

"Take this—!"

Hal used the magic gun to attack in burst mode. Three bullets of light were fired at the same time—

"O dragonslaying sword! Carrying the sword god's favored affection, bring victory to me!"

However, Galad used the dragonslaying sword to deflect all three bullets of light in the air.

Fast as lightning. His masterful swordsmanship had reached the realm of divine skills. Seventeen glowing runes of Ruruk Soun also surrounded the dragonslaying sword.

The runes meant "O blue sky, I beseech you to grant the sword god's favored affection unto my blade."

"A technique of assured annihilation, hidden within the dragonslaying sword... Do not think that the thunder god's sword is the only one."

"No, no, even as a special move, using a sword to defend against a gun is too much of a cheat..."

Realizing that the earlier sniping attack had been cut down in the same manner, Hal sighed.

Living up to its name as a trump card of dragonslaying power, its absurdity knew no bounds.

"However, my gun is also convenient to the point of cheating a little too."

"Indeed you are right. Putting aside the various dragon kings, one probably could not find among the dragons an opponent as troublesome as you."

Hovering in the air, Galad opened his jaws wide. He looked like he intended to breathe fire.

How much longer could Hal's protection last when it was about to vanish? Several seconds or ten-odd seconds...?

"Ugh...!"

Hal reflexively fired a shot. However, it was deflected by the dragonslaying sword.

This was why the enemy did not approach. At extremely close distances, it would be hard to defend against gunshots.

Hal began to feel anxious. If he fired with full auto, he could probably get past that sword to attack a dragon's greatest vulnerability—the heart. However, Galad would probably prioritize defense. Chances of success were likely to be quite low.

However, there was no chance of victory unless Hal tried his luck...

Hal realized this was the devil's temptation. He could not possibly obtain a good outcome even if he risked everything on a gamble. But if he surrendered here, the outcome was undoubtedly certain death—

At this moment, Akuro-Ou pounced.

She bit Galad's neck without warning. Orihime's "serpent" had one of her tails severed, leaving eight. In addition, the fox-wolf's expression was unprecedentedly violent.

Part 5

Collapsed on the ground, Rushalka had reached her limit.

However, Asya ordered her to invoke the pseudo-divinity of the Moon. This was an affinity governing faint moonlight, dark nights and disorientation. To put it further, even insanity was also—

Ever since ancient times, moonlight was something that induced madness in people. The night of the full moon was also what turned ordinary people into werewolves.

"Among our 'serpents,' Akuro-Ou is the only one who can fight right now."

"But the injury suffered earlier is causing Akuro-Ou terrible pain... I don't think she can fight without issue."

Confronted with Orihime's opinion, Asya replied.

"I will use Rushalka's pseudo-divinity to bring about madness, to make Akuro-Ou go berserk temporarily."

"G-Go berserk?"

"Yes. Although it becomes impossible for her to obey trivial commands, at least it'll help her forget the pain, to charge with greater vigor than before."

After Rushalka released her physical form, Asya stood on the ground, looking up at the sky.

Because she had concluded that she and the other witch were going to become burdens.

"Will Nee-sama and Akuro-Ou be fine...?"

"The most we can do is pray for our friends' good fortune. We will now watch quietly to see how things wrap up."

Asya nodded and replied to Hazumi next to her, who was murmuring to herself in worry.

"M-Making Akuro-Ou go berserk huh..."

Realizing this was his childhood friend's idea, Hal muttered.

The berserk Akuro-Ou was astounding in horsepower. No sooner had she ascended rapidly like a rocket than she seized an opening to bite Pavel Galad's throat and even chewed on his neck.

In an attempt to tear Akuro-Ou off him, Galad grabbed the fox-wolf's lower jaw with his left hand that was not wielding the sword.

"Guh...! Stop interfering!"

"I've got to thank Asya and Juujouji," Hal whispered. Now was an opportunity to snipe successfully.

He raised the magic gun and pointed at the silver dragon that was wrestling with the fox-wolf in the air. The target was the heart. Although there was interference from Akuro-Ou on top of Galad's body, that was not a problem.

"Go!"

Hal imagined the ballistic trajectory while firing the magic gun.

A bullet of red light shot out from the muzzle. Its trajectory swerved greatly when flying past the dragon, tracing out a U-shape to attack Galad's back!

However, the valorous warrior of the dragons was no pushover.

"O dragonslaying sword, receiving the sword god's favored affection, become my clone!"

He suddenly tossed away the dragonslaying sword in his hand.

Unbelievably, a technique of assured annihilation, "the sword god's favored affection," was controlling the blade like an invisible swordsman, swatting the dragonslaying gunshot away!

Next, the sword made a rapid descent like a bolt of lightning, aiming for the building's top floor—aiming for the floor that had become the roof after the ceiling vanished—to attack Hal from above.

It looked like Galad intended to kill Hal off before dealing with the vassals. Hal instantly pointed the magic gun at the sky. Now was the time to take a gamble. Hal had already prepared himself.

Instantly, he fired all his bullets in full auto mode. The target—the dragonslaying sword!

"If the weapons of both sides are on the same level...!"

Rather than a collision of spear and shield, this was a clash between two ultimate spears.

However, the dragonslaying sword itself—the Rune of the Sword—had left Galad's hand.

This meant that its magical power should have diminished. In that case—Hal prayed while watching where the bullets went and knew he had made the right gamble.

Shot in the blade by full auto gunfire of assured annihilation, the dragonslaying sword shattered over Hal's head.

Hal exhaled deeply. He had managed to survive, some way or another.

However, his ammunition was completely depleted. Right now, his destiny was in Akuro-Ou's hands. Hal looked up at the aerial battle between giant beasts, only to see that the tide was gradually shifting to one side.

The silver dragon held the advantage while the eight-tailed fox-wolf had fallen into an unfavorable predicament.

Due to casting away the dragonslaying sword, Galad could use both hands to grab Akuro-Ou's lower jaw and pull her off his neck.

Akuro-Ou was trying her best to recover her original posture.

The fox-wolf was pushing her face near the enemy by any means possible, trying to bite and sever Galad's neck.

"Haruga-kun, are you alright!?"

Hal jumped in surprise to hear Orihime's voice. Right now, he was on the top floor of a building that had lost its roof. The serpentine dragon leviathan that had acquired golden wings, Minadzuki, was flying towards him.

Equivalent to arms, the two front limbs had Orihime carefully cradled in her hands.

"I asked Hazumi to send me here!"

After telling Minadzuki to let her off, Orihime finally arrived at the building's top floor.

"I'm safe and sound, although I'm out of bullets again. By the way, what happened to Akuro-Ou?"

"You mean going berserk? Rushalka used magic to put her in that state so that she could forcibly pounce on that dragon... But she won't listen to me at all now."

Orihime sighed.

"I was thinking I'd have a better shot if I went nearer... But it's still no good."

"Figures. But even in a berserk state, you can't really expect a 'serpent' to have the ability to take care of elites like Galad."

Hal sighed and looked at Akuro-Ou and Galad.

Galad had detached the eight-tailed fox-wolf from himself completely.

Thus the two of them continued to fight in the air. Galad swung his silver-white arms and tore through Akuro-Ou's pelt with his sharp claws. Using his long tail as a log, he pummeled Akuro-Ou's body. He even used his dragon jaws to bite back savagely.

With every attack, Akuro-Ou's crimson blood would splatter in the air.

"Akuro-Ou! At least use the Bow to attack!"

Hal did not know if Orihime's thoughts had gotten through, but nine arrowheads appeared above Akuro-Ou.

But before they attacked, Galad swung his five-clawed right hand. The instant the claws lacerated Akuro-Ou's face, the nine arrowheads were dispelled.

"Fufufufu, I cannot allow you to use that. Once I take care of this accursed minion, there will be nothing to bar me from victory!"

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

In response to Galad's bold declaration and cutting claws, Akuro-Ou roared in wrath.

Hal now noticed. The Rune of the Sword was visible on Galad's right palm—That hand and its claws had turned into a substitute for the dragonslaying sword!

Speaking of which, Minadzuki had been staying quietly by Hal and Orihime's side since just now.

The serpentine dragon with golden wings had her head bowed towards Galad, probably intimidated by the Rune of the Sword.

"Although it's probably not as sharp as the true dragonslaying sword... at this rate, Akuro-Ou can't win."

"If only I could give Akuro-Ou more power..."

"Sigh, if only I could further increase the Bow's firepower..."

Seeing Akuro-Ou at a disadvantage, Hal and Orihime both sounded gloomy.

Power, strength, output, destructive power. Just as both of them sincerely desired the factors that Akuro-Ou needed the most—A thought suddenly occurred to Hal and he stared at the magic gun in his right hand.

As before, the gun-shaped "magic wand" allowed him to understand the method instinctively.

"Eh...!?"

Orihime was surprised probably because the magic gun had also told her how to accommodate Hal.

Then Hal recalled last evening's events.

Touching Hazumi's heart, Hinokagutsuchi had extracted Minadzuki's heartmetal from there.

A witch's heart was possibly the part most intimately linked to her leviathan's heartmetal. In that case, all he needed to do was follow the method told to him by the magic gun—

"H-Haruga-kun..."

"Juujouji..."

This extremely inappropriate method was making both of them blush and look down at the same time.

"W-What should I say...? I guess we'd better give up..."

"H-How unexpected. I was thinking that as the covert something or other, Haruga-kun, you'd use this as an excuse."

"Don't be silly. Despite my coyness, I still have a gentleman's pride."

"B-But now isn't the time for such idle chatter, right?"

This time, they gazed at each other with blushing faces.

Surprisingly, Orihime seemed to be actively saying what could be construed as hurrying words. However, Hal did not have the kind of carnivorous personality that would allow him to accept readily. As a side note, he was completely inexperienced. What a conundrum.

Just as Hal's entire body froze, hesitating over what he should do, Orihime yelled:

"W-Woman is judged by her courage, man by his charm! Haruga-kun, stop thinking and just do it!"

"Y-You've gotten the proverb backwards, Juujouji."

"Quit yammering! Make it quick!"

Orihime suddenly leaned her back against Hal, entrusting her weight to him.

Hal and Juujouji Orihime were in close contact. Feeling her warmth through his body, smelling an abundantly feminine fragrance from her hair and uniform, Hal became extremely flustered.

At the same time, he felt troubled—To go further, even his emotions were getting excited.

"Right now... Only in times like these am I willing to offer you my body and soul. Hence, Haruga-kun, let's defeat that dragon together, okay...?"

Leaning her back against Hal, Orihime spoke with sadness.

She was quoting words that Hinokagutsuchi had used before. Hal could not see her face but he could imagine that it had most likely turned as red as a tomato.

"A-Also, just between you and me here."

"Huh?"

"I-I also feel that going out with you might not be bad. Although it's just a tiny feeling. N-No, just slightly more than tiny."

"Huh!?"

"I worry immensely whenever you take risks, Haruga-kun, but my heart keeps pounding the whole time. My chest feels tight with a slightly painful feeling... Oh, forget what I just said. R-Regardless, I hope the two of us will be victorious together. Together with you, Haruga-kun!"

"Juujouji!"

Listening to Orihime murmur in a voice that could not be more adorable, Hal could no longer think about anything.

He lost his hesitation and embraced Orihime tightly from behind. Then he maneuvered his right hand—the palm where the Rune of the Bow surfaced—in front of her and grabbed fiercely.

What he grabbed was her breast, the left side of Orihime's voluptuous bust—the place near the heart.

This was the softest and most elastic sensation Hal had ever known in the world.

"Mm... Mmmmmmm!"

Orihime began to moan. Unlike during Akuro-Ou's birth, she did not sound like she was in pain.

Instead, it sounded slightly bittersweet. This further ignited Hal's emotions that were heightened to begin with. Riding on rising feelings, the rune in his right hand began to output astounding magical power.

The magical power was sent into Orihime's heart, transmitting to the heartmetal of Akuro-Ou who was fighting desperately in the air —

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

The white eight-tailed fox-wolf roared with unprecedented intensity.

While Hal and Orihime were having their little argument, the silver-white dragon had viciously tore into Akuro-Ou's body repeatedly, covering her with slash wounds. However, the fox-wolf's ferocity now increased explosively.

A gigantic Rune of the Bow appeared in front of Akuro-Ou.

Naturally, Pavel Galad instantly swung his right hand and the Rune of the Sword, to rip apart the bow's enchanted crest—Or rather, he attempted to rip it apart.

However, the Rune of the Bow deflected Galad's claws this time.

"What?"

The silver dragon stared in wide-eyed shock.

Because Akuro-Ou was currently shrouded in crimson flames. The flames burned all at once then exploded greatly. At point blank range, even Galad was blown away by the explosion's power and fell towards the wasteland.



"Those are... runes of Ruruk Soun?"

Amidst flames and the explosion, Hal saw twenty-one glowing magic symbols.

This arrangement implied "I will fire the sun-shooting divine bow at the sky, to exterminate the sun." A technique of assured annihilation infused with the dragonslaying bow, the sun-shooting divine bow —

"Use my vassal... Turn Akuro-Ou into an arrow to be fired...!?"

The instant Hal realized this, arrowheads appeared around the burning Akuro-Ou in the air.

Nine black arrowheads. Previously, they were each roughly the size of the fox-wolf's head, but now, they were almost as large as Akuro-Ou's own body —

Thus leading nine arrowheads, Akuro-Ou rapidly descended upon the wasteland, charging at the massive body of Galad who was trying to get up.

"Nu, guoooooooooooooh!"

Then the flames rose. A gigantic pillar of fire appeared in a corner of western Shinjuku.

It was as gigantic as this area's landmark, the former Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building.

A pillar of fire exceeding two hundred meters in length. The intrepid silver dragon was burning inside it, helpless before the divine might of fire. His entire body was ravaged by the conflagration.

Currently, Pavel Galad was like a piece of iron that had been thrown into a furnace.

The crimson flames swirled in a vortex, incinerating the silver dragon's gigantic body with temperatures almost high enough to drive one insane.

"Ohhhhhhhhhh!"

In the end, the silver dragon exploded, leaving a parting scream—He literally met his demise in a glorious death.

But after witnessing this scene, Hal and Orihime did not even have excess energy remaining to rejoice.

"We won...?"

"Probably. But since the enemy was crazy strong, it doesn't feel real to me at all..."

"Me too. That dragon was a bit too strong, too troublesome..."

Orihime was resting her weight on Hal. Hal was embracing Orihime from behind.

In this posture, the two of them collapsed on the floor together.

This was because they were utterly drained, unable to stand. These were symptoms similar to anemia, which appeared whenever witches severely depleted their stamina. In addition, the two of them were panting heavily.

Both of them were completely exhausted, as though they had completed an intense athletic competition as partners.

Then there was Orihime's supple body. Hal knew that her weight and warmth were surprisingly pleasurable, but if he did not hurry and get away...

Just as Hal felt anxious because his body could not move, Orihime suddenly apologized.

"Sorry, Haruga-kun. Umm... I-I'm very heavy, right?"

"O-Of course not. You're amazingly light. Yeah, I'm speaking the truth."

"B-But I'm not as slender as Asya-san. All over my body, uh, I suppose there's a lot of meat...? Anyway, there ought to be a certain level of weight..."

"No no, it's the opposite. Isn't this great?"

"Hey—Haruga-kun, you are a pervert after all!"

Despite the argument, their dialogue finally started to become familiar.

Just as the two of them found it inexplicably funny and laughed at the same time...

"You two won a great battle!"

"So amazing. I'm so touched!"

Asya and Hazumi's voices. The two of them were panting heavily.

They must have gone out of their way to climb the building's staircase to arrive, happy about the victory. However, Hal and Orihime received them with embarrassed feelings.

After all, for a boy and a girl to be lying lethargically on the ground in such a posture—

As expected, Hazumi's gaze wandered left and right while she spoke, "Eh? Haruga-san, Nee-sama, what on earth is this...?"

She was completely flustered, unsure what to do.

Then the veteran witch and Europe's former Shootdown Ace glared and yelled, "H-H-H-Haruomi and Asya-san, what are you doing heeeeeeere!?"

"N-No, it is not what you think, Asya-san. Hazumi too, calm down and listen to me. This was a necessary evil, unavoidable for the sake of fighting dragonkind...!"

Orihime desperately tried to explain.

On the other hand, Hal simply looked up at the clear blue sky as though escaping reality.

A helicopter rose into the air, accompanied by the noise of propeller blades. More than likely, it was carrying personnel involved with the MPD or the SDF, or possibly Hiiragi-san and her men.

Regardless, these organizations had probably monitored the battle.

"Explaining to them will be such a pain too..."

Hal could not help but grumble. However, this was all because he had survived.

As this thought crossed his mind, feelings of joy finally surged in his heart.

Epilogue

"However, to think that humans could use the runes of Ruruk Soun..."

"This new fact is completely unexpected."

After Kenjou exclaimed in amazement, Hiiragi Yukari immediately offered her comment.

The two of them were at the Kanagawa's prefectural government at Yokohama City. A brick building dating back to the early Showa period, it was full of retro ambiance. Yukari's office was located somewhere inside.

SAURU was a research organization devoted to the promotion and usage of the knowledge system called magic.

Yukari's job as a member of the organization was to command all witches in the Kanto region. Since everything was convenient in close proximity to state agencies, she had borrowed some space from the

prefectural government's Supernatural Creatures Countermeasures Bureau.

"That boy has gotten himself into some troublesome things, poor him," remarked Kenjou, reading a printed report.

Haruga Haruomi and Asya Rubashvili. This report was jointly written by the two parties who had gotten involved with the magic symbol called the Rune of the Bow.

Four days had passed since the conclusion of the battle against the elite dragon, Pavel Galad.

"How about we simply put him in a skintight costume emblazoned with an 'S' then treat him as the Superman who protects Japan and peace? Headquarters has also reported that his true identity is completely unknown."

"Indeed, that would save a lot of trouble, but..."

"Not gonna work, right?"

"Not gonna work. After all, the organization's executives already know."

Kenjou smiled wryly when Yukari made the proposal in a half joking manner.

Unmanned spy planes had taken images of the battle against Pavel Galad. They were already seen by the person who had arrived to aid Japan on that day. She was the strongest witch in the Trans-Pacific area, in other words, the beloved daughter of Master Gregory, one of SAURU's founders.

"I have a bad feeling about today's meeting."

"This matter will definitely be pursued relentlessly."

While the boss and subordinate were sharing the same feelings, someone knocked at the door.

Yukari shrugged and called out "please enter" to invite the visitor. The one who entered the room was the person they had been discussing, a blonde Caucasian girl who was dressed in a black one-piece dress.

"Eh? Master Gregory's daughter came to Japan?"

Hal was shocked to hear the news. Beside him, Hazumi's eyes brightened with curiosity. Hal and his friends were sitting on a bench in school, chatting enthusiastically about topics in their circle.

"Would she be a member of SAURU?"

"Yes. She's the daughter of one of the main leaders at the Istanbul headquarters, and also a master-class witch. She's apparently some kind of chief researcher chairing the Trans-Pacific area as well."

After explaining that, Hal shifted his gaze to the one who had told him that.

"Although I've never met her, Asya, you know her, right?"

"Yes, but she's the type of acquaintance that makes you want to stay away from her as much as possible."

Rather than friend, Asya called her an acquaintance. Hal could get a slight sense of caustic spite from Asya's murmuring.

Although Hal nodded in understanding, Hazumi showed a puzzled expression as befitted her angelic nature.

"To put it in simpler terms, she's your polar opposite, Hazumi-san."

"My polar opposite? What do you mean by that?"

"Namely, a demon..."

"She's surely hiding a fox's tail under her skirt. After all, she's a Machiavellian villain. Also, I've heard that she seems to be gathering information about Haruomi and the Rune of the Bow."

Hal could not help but look up at the sky after hearing what Asya said.

"Will I be treated as a research subject like lab animals?"

"This possibility should be quite unlikely. You are a super dangerous character who keeps such an absurd weapon on your person."

"If anything happens, I'll follow the footsteps of Galad and try my hand at the conquest of Japan."

"C-Conquest!?"

"Oh my, that was a joke. Anyway, bridges will be crossed when I get to them."

After adding an explanation for the surprised Hazumi, Hal suddenly switched his attitude.

His situation was changing at a frightening rate. The dice had already been cast.

Rather than agonize with clumsy seriousness, it would be better to leave the worrying for when things came up. Seeing Hal like that, the childhood friend smiled faintly.

However, she instantly scowled and changed the topic all of a sudden.

"By the way... I recently heard some negative rumors about Haruomi and Hazumi-san."

"Uh, about us?"

"Haruomi not only made a move on Orihime-san but even played around with her younger cousin, Hazumi-san. You are two-timing scum, a bastard of the worst sort—Hearsay along those lines, in other words, rumors."

After Asya finished, Hal and Hazumi went "...", falling silent.

"Fufu. Do you two have any ideas?"

"Not really, just that I've been spending time with Shirasaka quite often lately."

"Th-Then when classmates asked what my relationship was with Haruga-san... I gave this answer: 'Senpai is like an older brother to me.'"

"Then before you knew it, weird rumors starting flying around."

"Rumors are so scary... Oh, but they don't bother me. It's true that I spend a lot of time together with Senpai. Moreover, we haven't done anything bad."

"Shirasaka is such a good girl. Don't you agree, Asya?"

"Please wait! There are too many problems to point out, I don't even know where to start!"

During the conversation, Asya suddenly yelled.

"First of all, what's with that 'Senpai'!?"

"That was my request. I had a hunch that being addressed that way would immerse myself in the bittersweet ambiance of youth. Sure enough, I tried it and it felt great. So that's what happened."

"Then what's with 'a lot of time together'!?"

"Oh, that was my request. There are many things I wish to learn from Senpai's work, so I asked him to let me be his assistant."

"W-When did something like this happen...? He's clearly just Haruomi!"

Seeing Asya grumble inexplicably, Hal frowned. Next to him, Hazumi was staring at Asya curiously.

"What's the problem? It's not like I'm bullying her."

"Yes, I think Senpai looks after me a lot. Oh right, regarding the 'request' I was in the middle of talking about in Shinjuku the other day..."

Hearing Hazumi speak timidly, Hal remembered.

"Ah yes. In the event that you survive that battle—Is that the one, Shirasaka?"

"Y-Yes, Senpai. Please allow me... to use that rune's power too. I hope to help Senpai, Asya-san and Nee-sama even more!"

Hazumi was speaking with a very serious expression on her face, putting Hal at a loss how to answer.

His changing situation seemed to have spread its influence even to this kind of place.

While Haruomi and company were engaged in lively chatter, Orihime was standing in front of the cultural clubs building.

Just earlier, she had spotted her cousin, Asya and Haruga Haruomi sitting on that bench, engrossed in their conversation. Although she could have joined them...

She felt embarrassed to confront the only boy in that group, so she came to this place instead.

"Haruga-kun hasn't changed at all after that..."

Orihime grumbled in a murmur.

During the battle, the conversation before the final attack...

Its contents were such that a change in their relationship would not come as a surprise. However, the key figure, Haruga Haruomi, apparently interpreted it this way:

"Going out might not be bad" = "No promise was made."

It was unknown whether this was the reason, but Hal's attitude towards Orihime remained no different from before the battle.

"And since there's Asya-san too, this is fine, this is fine..."

Experiencing these feelings for the first time in her life, Orihime felt quite troubled.

Something felt stuck in her chest, it was very unpleasant. She felt an urge to complain to the young man who stood as the main culprit, to say something like "you don't understand my feelings" —

Just as Orihime, who was seldom prone to sighing, finally sighed...

"Oh my, you came today?"

The eccentric giant who happened to pass by, President M of the UFO Research Club, spoke to her.

"It's not like I can't afford the tea to serve you, so come on over if you have time. There are many things to be done."

"Oh okay. Yes, I am free today," Orihime replied, brought back to her senses by the sudden instructions.

Thus, the two of them climbed the stairs to enter the clubroom. There was no one at the room before them, so they were alone.

At this moment, Orihime remembered. Now that she thought about it, Asya apparently discussed many private matters with this president. The silver-haired witch had said:

'That person is very broad in both body and mind.'

Indeed, President M carried herself with solemnity and magnanimity that one would not find in a high school student.

Was that the reason? Orihime found herself saying involuntarily, "U-Umm, I would like to discuss some matters with you... Is that okay?"

"It's quite sudden, but no problem. I have never refused anyone's request for my counsel."

"Then I shall take you up on that. Oh, but this is not about me, it's just my friend's troubles."

"....."

Orihime swiftly denied all personal relevance. After staring at her for a good while, President M started speaking slowly:

"Your situation is truly tricky to handle..."

Meanwhile, inside the Old Tokyo wasteland, in a clearing that used to be the Shinjuku Imperial Gardens—

Particles of light were coming together to form a mass of shining silver luster. This light slowly increased in size, gradually constituting a certain shape.

The shape was a dragon—the super lifeform known as an elite dragon.

And his name was Pavel Galad. In other words, the dragonslaying sword's successor.

"Urgh... At least I managed to survive..."

Indeed, he had been torn apart by dragonslaying flames.

However, probably thanks to the arranging the runes of Ruruk Soun before the battle in the meaning of "fire of resurrection," he finally revived with difficulty, although it took quite some time.

That being said, this was a secret ritual of extreme difficulty, rumored to succeed only one-twentieth of the time.

What had guided the ritual to success was probably luck—and the Rune of the Sword appearing on his palm. Even without invoking protection, inheritors of dragonslaying runes were also blessed with unnatural resilience.

"Before I conquer the Road to Kingship and ascend to the dragon king's throne... I must not die!"

Galad vowed with obsession and passion. However, his body was covered in wounds after resurrection, merely sustaining a "dragon-like" shape at best.

With every pulsation, his heartmetal would produce excruciating pain. Simply lifting a finger exhausted him utterly.

This was due to deficiency in blood, magical power and nutrients. He must replenish these substances and give his body sufficient rest—

To use his remaining power with maximum efficiency, Galad came up with a plan. Namely, to use magic to shrink his body.

From ten-odd meters in length to the level of 180cm.

Furthermore, he also used transfiguration magic. This was necessary in order to hide in a human city.

Right now, Pavel Galad was a pale-skinned and handsome young man with a head of silver hair and a human face. Although his muscular body was completely nude, that appearance was completely *human*.

"This humiliation—I shall undoubtedly purge it by achieving conquest!"

As a pure-blooded dragon, transforming into a human was unprecedented humiliation for Galad.

Then on the land of Alaska was Sophocles.

The man who sacrificed everything for the Road to Kingship despite being a human. Listening to the report he delivered after returning to the white plains of snow, Princess Yukikaze laughed lightly.

"So that silver dragon met defeat. Hahaha, this bow user is pretty good!"

Princess Yukikaze looked up at the azure sky.

This was to transmit her thoughts to the moon's surface far away. To summon the minions residing on the other side.

"Well, this alone is not enough to tell if his caliber is sufficient to win my approval."

Come, come. She called to her golden minions while issuing orders.

Come to the ground to serve me—Yukikaze.

"However, my interest is piqued. Fufu, although I have no territory on earth, this might be nice once in a while. I have not had a chance to rampage as I please for so long!"

Thus declared Princess Yukikaze to her minions and Sophocles, who was watching over her back.

The hem of the gallant Princess Yukikaze's white one-piece dress fluttered in the wind.

Afterword

It's been a while, I am Takedzuki Jou. The second volume is finally released.

This is all thanks to your loving support, dear readers, for which I hereby express my solemn gratitude.

'A human-sized pseudo-UI●●●man, aided by girls who control monsters, fighting against the authentic UI●●● Space Garrison that's trying to take over the Earth.'

That's the kind of concept where this story originated.

After various amendments, the result was the current form.

"One volume can't fit in that much, so would it be possible to sell a duology of volumes together, or make it as thick as a dictionary?" Although something so unreasonable crossed my mind in the early stages of writing, I still finished Volume 1 then started writing Volume 2 to achieve my goal.

Although I totally haven't decided how many volumes to write, if possible, please accompany me for the rest of the ride.

...That being said, there is the possibility of the third volume ending with a "And our fight goes on!" (sweat drop)

Speaking of the problematic next volume, the main heroine (tentative) is apparently warming up in anticipation while saying "It's about time for me to shine!" However, it feels like the new heroine will clash with Orihime-san and the others with a violent shower of sparks. What will be the outcome?

Following Volume 1, Volume 2 has enjoyed many people's help as well.

First, allow me to express my gratitude to everyone involved in the whole process including editing, proofreading, graphic design, bookbinding, printing, sales, etc.

Despite their busy schedules, illustrator Nimura-sama and everyone at ALcot have added a lot of exquisite color to the visuals and character designs, so let me express my undying appreciation for them.

This time's Princess Yukikaze and the slightly wild oyaji-style Hannibal are very much to my liking.

Also, Pavel Galad looks truly awesome in the design sketches.

Finally, a private message from me. Kimura Kou-sensei, I will definitely offer you the book this time, so please don't buy it before I deliver it over to you (wry smile).

